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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XXXV, No. 1 *EVERY STORY BRAND NEW* May, 1945

A Complete Walt Slade Novel

DRUMS OF DOOM

By BRADFORD SCOTT

Through flame and gunsmoke the mysterious hard-fighting hombre known as El Halcon, The Hawk, plunges in to unravel the sinister mystery of drums that signal death —and cattle that vanish into nowhere! 11

Two Complete Novelets

BEEFLEGGER'S LUCK . . . . . Syl MacDowell 32
When Swap and Whopper suddenly collide with a Black Market set-up, there's no ceiling on trouble for everybody concerned!

LAST CALL FOR A LONE WOLF . . David X. Manners 42
Jeeter Price comes to a railroad boomtown in order to wage a grim final battle for gun vengeance against his hated enemies!

Thrilling Short Stories

NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN . . . . . Bud Wilks 29
Tom March and Ike Tolson get a new slant on an old feud

ROWBOAT FEUD . . . . . Ross Rocklynne 54
Rancher Jim Nesbitt has the last laugh on land grabbers

BOOT HILL BACKFIRE . . . . . Gunnison Steele 60
Small town justice demands a showdown between gunman and rancher

VARMINTS ON THE C CROSS . . . Henry Haldeman 64
A Tennessee mountain war reaches a gun-blazing climax

Special Features

THE HITCHING RAIL . . . . . Buck Benson 6
Join our nation-wide club for readers! Coupon on page 80

HOW WELL DO YUH KNOW YORE WEST? . Quiz Feature 53
Five questions to test your rangeland savvy

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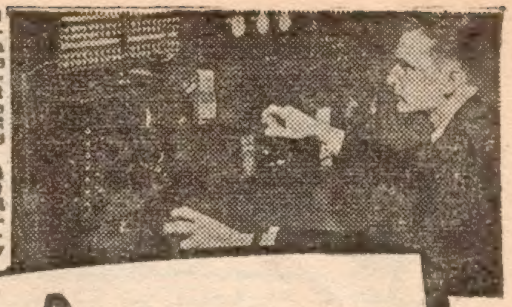

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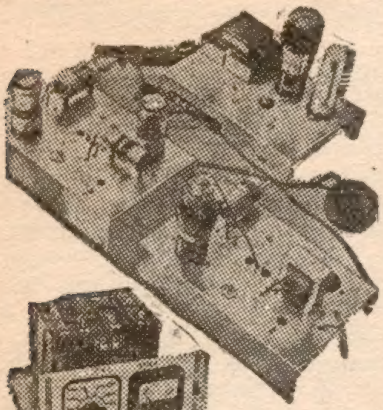

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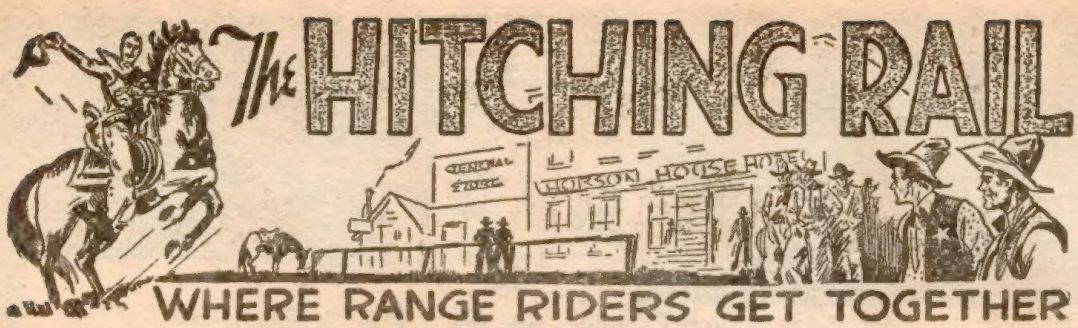

YESSUH, folks, got such a dandy lot o' letters askin' questions piled up before me on this here old desk I'm gonna mount up and ride straight into 'em, answerin' as many as possible, *pronto!*

Here, top o' this pile, is a letter from Wilson Oaks o' the minin' town o' Butte, Montana. He's interested in knowin' more about the life o' the famous John Chisum, cattle king o' Texas and New Mexico back in the 1860's, and I aims to tell him.

"Chisum," Not "Chisholm"

First, though, lemme set you straight on a point or two, Wilson. You spells the man's name "Chisholm" which is wrong but a mistake a lot o' folks make. His name was pronounced the same, but it was spelled "Chisum."

Also, you state he was owner o' the famous Jingle Bob brand o' cattle, which is correct, but then you says he was the man for who the famous old Chisholm Trail was named. That latter statement is wrong, son. Fact o' the matter is you've got the two men Jesse Chisholm and John Chisum mixed up, probably thinkin' they're one and the same.

Jesse Chisholm, the man the Chisholm Trail was named for, was a half-breed Indian trader with a store on a creek named for him. The original Chisholm Trail, so called because of Jesse Chisholm and his trading post, extended from Chisholm Creek, Texas, to the town of Anadarko, Oklahoma, 250 miles.

When the cattle drives began in 1866 the herds followed this trail northward from the crossing of the Cimarron River at what is now Dover, Oklahoma, to Abilene, Kansas. Thus about 150 miles o' the Chisholm Trail was used. The cattlemen subsequently called the entire trail the "Chisholm Trail."

A Trail Blazer

Jesse Chisholm was born in Tennessee in 1806—a half Cherokee. He came into prominence as a trail blazer and Indian trader in Texas in 1832, when about twenty-six years of age. He lived a great deal in Oklahoma, then Indian Territory. Died in Oklahoma in March, 1868, at the age of sixty-two.

John Chisum, the cattle king, was the more famous character of the two. He was both famed and feared throughout the length and breath of the wild country where he was king over his great holdings.

He first ranched in Texas, but in 1866 he drove his ten thousand head of longhorns from Texas to the Pecos River in New Mexico, with Charlie Goodnight.

Forty miles south of old Fort Sumner, New Mexico, he established his great ranch known as the Bosque Grande, and drove cattle north using a western trail; never the old Chisholm Trail, it's said.

The Vagabond Cattle King

John Chisum's New Mexico kingdom stretched along two hundred miles of river front from the Hondo River to the Texas border, but he looked somethin' like a vagabond.

His well-worn overalls were often frayed at the cuffs, and they covered a big, lanky, powerful frame. He was tall, slightly stooped in the shoulders, and he wore an old felt hat, pushed back from his forehead revealing a few strings of black, straight hair.

He was no common looking man, though, for his steely gray eyes, firm-set, square jaw, thin, straight-lined mouth with a heavy, black mustache, pointed at the ends, made him a man to command a second glance from whomever chanced to see him.

Battle With Indians

His cattle kingdom was annoyed more'n a little by maraudin' bands o' Indians from the Mescalaro reservation. The government bought meat for the Indians, plenty of good, fresh beef, but there were times when they preferred to go out and rob and kill for the pure joy o' killin' and the chase.

When Chisum had stood enough o' their

(Continued on page 72)

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*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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NOTICE

Please don't confuse the U. S. School of Music method with any system of teaching music "by ear" or by trick charts. Our method teaches you to play by actual notes — not by any trick or number system.

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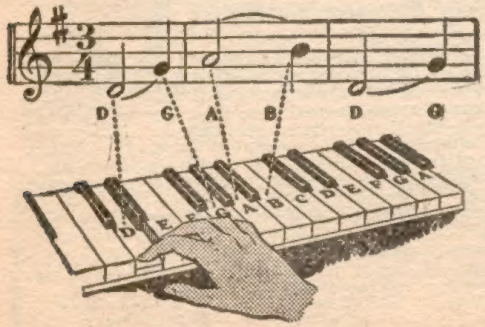

From the above diagram you can see for yourself how easy it is to learn by this Print and Picture method. You simply look at the music and diagram and see which notes to strike. In a few minutes you will find yourself playing the famous "Merry Widow Waltz."

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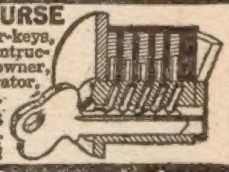

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"Done in, all right," Slade said

DRUMS OF DOOM

By BRADFORD SCOTT

Through flame and gunsmoke the mysterious hard-fighting hombre known as El Halcon, the Hawk, plunges in to unravel the sinister mystery of drums that signal death—and cattle that vanish into nowhere!

CHAPTER I

Terror By Fire

HANGING in a sky of silver-spangled velvet, a red moon brooded over the Maravilla Hills.

It was a bloody moon, sullen and menacing, low above the topmost crags that shot upward like teeth in a festering jawbone. Its mottled face glowered at the grim hills, which seemed to glower back in dark defiance at its lurid light that sought, in vain, to penetrate the ominous gorges already filled by the moan and mutter of white water. It was a moon fit to light the obscene orgies of witches and warlocks, of spectral elementals and goblins.

Pouring into Lost Valley, which was battlemented on the east and west by the beetling cliffs of the Maravillas, the moonlight assumed the quality of a luminous shadow. In

AN EXCITING COMPLETE WALT SLADE NOVEL

its lurid glow, spire-rock and chimney-rock appeared to crouch and shudder. The crooked branches of mesquite writhed as if in torment. Objects became distorted and unreal, deceptive as to bulk and distance.

Suddenly the silence that brooded over hill and valley was broken by a singular, deep throbbing. Rhythmic and solemn, it shook the night air. A high staccato rattle, from far to the north, was followed after a pause by a deep roll from the south. The deep beat quickened, slowed, then heightened into obvious question and answer.

Riding the rimrock trail on the east wall of the valley, a horseman reined in his black mount to listen. Motionless, he sat for minutes, the concentration furrow deepening between his dark brows, while the air quivered to the ominous throb and mutter that, it seemed to him, monotonously repeated a sentence.

"We will kill you if we can!" it seemed to say. "We will kill you, if we can!" Over and over, the rumbling threat..

"We will kill you, if we can!" said the men in the south.

"We will kill you, if we can!" said the men in the north.

"Indian drums, Shadow, or I never heard one," the rider told his black horse. "War drums, from the sound of them. But what in blazes! Geronimo and his Apache raiders just aren't any more, and there hasn't been any Indian trouble in this section for years. Drums! Talking drums. Shore wish I could read what they're saying."

For a little longer the drums grumbled and muttered. Then the sound died away in a final long roll from the south, echoed by an answering whisper from the north. Again there was eerie silence, broken only by the yipping of a distant coyote, and a vicious reply from an owl nearby.

The tall rider hitched to a more comfortable position the small guitar case suspended across his shoulders. He gathered up the reins, spoke to the black horse. Its clicking iron shoes sounded abnormally loud in the stillness as it started up.

Then, abruptly, the silence that walled in the sounds of the jogging horse was again broken. A distant, wisping clatter grew to a mutter, a beat, a low thunder. The rider straightened in his saddle, stared down into the shadowy valley, from which the sound arose.

Suddenly, a few hundred yards to the west, a straggle of chaparral sent forth movement. From behind a jut of chimney-rock, too, dimly-seen shapes appeared. They moved swiftly northward toward the distant mouth of the valley.

"Cows," the watcher muttered. "Purty good sized herd, too, and goin' like the wind."

The herd flowed past his range of vision. Behind the galloping steers came mounted men—seven altogether—flapping slickers, snapping quirts, lashing the cattle with rope-ends. Then they were gone behind a bristle of growth. The rumble of the speeding herd faded, died away.

But the silence did not resume. Flung out of the south, like a misplaced echo of the drumming hoofs, came a stutter of shots. They were followed by more evenly-spaced shots, as if the unseen gunmen were carefully lining on a diminishing target.

Again the horseman pulled up. He shook his black head, listened intently. There was no sound of hoofs clattering toward him, no jingling of bridle iron swelling rhythmically out of the dark.

"Not headed this way," he muttered. "Figgered at first that gun-slingin' might have something to do with that herd larrupin' down this way, but I reckon not. Well, this is getting to be quite a night. June along, Shadow, and let's see what next."

THE horseman rode a half mile, and his attention was attracted by a red glow slowly climbing up the southern sky, to the west.

The moon, which had risen some distance above the mountain wall, had lost much of its bloody hue now, and its light was changing to ashen silver, shimmering and softening the valley floor. But this new radiance was fierce and fiery.

The tall rider spoke to his horse and the animal quickened its gait.

"That's a house burning, or my name's not Slade," the rider declared. "Sift sand, yuh jughead, let's find out what's goin' on in this section."

The rimrock trail was plain in the moonlight now, and the black horse flashed along it like an ebon shadow. His tall rider leaned forward in the saddle, peering intently at the widening and deepening fire-glow. To his ears came a faint sound of shouting. The trail veered around a bulge of stone.

An exciting scene met his gaze as he rounded that curve.

Directly ahead, the cliff which formed the east wall of the valley changed to a steep and boulder-strewn slope. Opposite it, a quarter of a mile out on the valley floor, a good-sized ranchhouse was burning fiercely. Flames were shooting from the roof and billowing from the lower windows. In the red light figures ran wildly about.

As the rider reined his horse down, several of those figures ran toward the house with a ladder. They placed it against the ledge of a second-story window. But from a first floor window, flames shot forth and curled around the lower portion of the ladder. The fierce

The Hawk shot at the rope

heat drove back the man who was trying to mount.

A second man tried, only to fail. The figures retreated, shouting and gesturing.

The rider on the rimrock gathered up his reins. His lean, bronzed face grew stern and bleak, and the clear gray of the eyes changed to the wintry chill of a glacier lake.

"I figger we can make it down the slope, feller," he said to his horse. "Looks like somebody's in trouble down there, and no time to waste. Get goin'!"

The horse didn't like the steep slope, and said so with an explosive snort, but he started down it. Slade steadied him with voice and hand. The black animal reached the valley floor in a cloud of dust and a shower of displaced fragments, sitting on his tail. He skittered, but recovered his balance by a miracle of agility.

"Trail, Shadow!" Slade's voice rang out. "Trail!"

Instantly the black extended himself. He flashed across the valley floor like a cloud before a driving wind. Eyes gleaming, nostrils flaring redly, hoofs thundering, he closed the distance, slithering to a halt in the yard of the burning ranchhouse.

Men shouted wildly and ducked for cover as the great black crashed into their midst. Slade was already out of the saddle.

"What's goin' on here?" his voice rang out, edged with authority. "Why yuh tryin' to get that ladder up?"

"The Old Man!" a babble of excited voices answered him. "He's up there—second floor—saw him at the window—smoke got him—fell back before he could climb out!"

Slade glanced up at the window from which at that moment the burnt-in-two ladder dropped with a clatter. He measured the distance with his eye. The flames bursting from the lower window were climbing the outer wall but were still below the second story. Back of the open second-story window, a reddish glow was beginning to strengthen.

"Fire eatin' through the floor," Slade muttered. "Stairs blocked. No tree close enough to climb up and swing in from."

He whirled and gripped the shoulder of a man who seemed somewhat less excited than the rest.

"Get me a crowbar or a posthole digger," he ordered. "Or even a spade with a long, strong handle."

There was that in his voice which forbade question or argument. The man raced to a small outbuilding nearby and returned with a long-handled spade.

A glance told Slade that the stout handle was of seasoned hickory. He had already taken his rope from his saddle. He noosed the spade handle in the middle now, took a turn and a hitch and drew it tight. Then he held the spade up, poised over his shoulder.

FOR an instant he stood rigid, like a bronze statue of a javelin thrower. Then his long right arm shot forward. The spade hurtled through the air, kept straight by its heavy metal head, the rope trailing behind. Right through the open second-story window it shot, to land on the floor with a clatter that sounded above the roar of the flames.

Slade drew the dangling rope taut, whipping the sag up before the flames from the lower window could sear it. As he had figured, the long handle of the spade caught on either side of the window frame and held fast.

Instantly, the trained roping horse threw his weight against the rope, tightening it till it hummed. Slade gripped the taut line with sinewy fingers and started up it hand over hand.

Shouts of protest and warning went up from the assembled cowboys.

"Feller, yuh'll get caught up there and roasted, too!"

"The fire'll burn the rope through and yuh can't git back!"

"The Old Man's suffocated by now, anyhow!"

Slade heard Shadow snort, and the scrape of his slipping hoofs, but he knew the great black would never slacken the rope. Now he was dangling over the flame spouting window. Its furnace breath seared him. For an instant his brain whirled, his senses reeled. Then he gripped the window ledge, drew himself up and with a plunge and heave sprawled on the floor.

Flames flickered through the floor, near the far wall. Their ominous roar and crackle was just outside the closed door. The door itself creaked and groaned under the beat of the fire rushing up from the furnace below. Once the door gave under the strain, a volcano of destruction would pour into the room.

For a moment, Slade lay gasping in the clearer air near the floor. Then he raised himself to hands and knees. An eternity of frantic groping and his hands encountered a limp body. He held the man's pulse and found its thready beat.

"Mebbe we'll make it yet, feller," he muttered.

He whipped the kerchief from his neck, found the man's wrists and bound them firmly together. Then he stood up, gasping in the heat, and looped the bound arms about his neck. The man was a heavy burden, but he was inches shorter than Slade.

Awkwardly, Slade shuffled to the window. Gripping his burden with one arm, he inched onto the sill until he was in a sitting

position, his legs dangling down the wall, his boots crisping in the flames licking their soles. He gripped the rope with both hands and moved off the ledge.

"If yuh slip or take a step now, it's the big jump, feller," he muttered.

But Shadow didn't slip. He snorted loudly as the double weight strained the rope. Irons gripping the ground, legs widespread, he reared back and stood rigid. The cinch creaked, the saddle tree groaned. But the hull stayed together, and the girth held.

It seemed to Slade that for an age he hung over the blistering flames, his lungs bursting for air, his arms aching with the strain that every instant threatened to tear his hands from their grip and hurl him and his helpless burden into the furnace beneath. The slant of the rope was not enough to permit him to slide down.

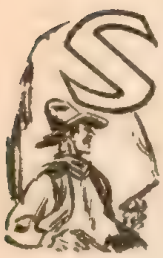
Hand over hand, he passed out of reach of the flames. The ground was still a long way off. To let go now meant a broken leg, at least, for himself, possibly death for the unconscious man. His muscles were trembling. His hands felt as if a red-hot iron was being passed back and forth across the palms. An ever-tightening band was around his chest, suffocating him, sapping his strength. Dimly he heard the sound of excited shouts seemingly far below. Then suddenly hands gripped his legs. With a gasp of relief he let go his hold.

The rescuing hands broke his fall. He felt the strangling arms of the unconscious man plucked from around his neck, the heavy drag of his body removed. Hands lifted him to a sitting position. Somebody pressed a bottle to his lips.

"Son," a voice declared, "you and the Old Man are both livin' on borrowed time!"

CHAPTER II

A Killer Strikes



SLADE'S head quickly cleared. Assisted, he stood up. Behind him sounded a protesting snort.

"Ease off, Shadow," he flung over his shoulder to the black.

"The hoss don't need to," said the man who had spoken. "Rope just burned through and fell down. Son, that was the goldurndest smartest piece of work I ever seed."

Slade smiled down at him, his even teeth flashing startlingly white in his bronzed face.

"I dunno," he said. "Figgered I had to get in that window somehow, and haven't sprouted wings yet. Calc'lated a rope was the only way to do it by. It worked."

"It shore did," said the other, "and the Old Man has got you to thank for not wakin' up with a coal shovel in his hands. How is he?" he called to the cowboys, who were ministering to the ranch owner.

"Comin' out of it," came the reply. "Be settin' up cussin' in another minute."

The questioner held out his hand.

"Son, my name's Blakely—Tom Blakely," he said. "I'm foreman of this spread, the CH, and the old man yuh saved is the owner, Cal Higborn."

"My name's Slade—first handle whittled down to Walt." He shook the proffered hand. "But what's this all about? How'd the fire catch?"

Blakely let loose a string of crackling oaths.

"Didn't catch," he growled. "Was set—set in half a dozen places on the first floor. A fire arrow or somethin' was shot onto the roof, too. When we heerd the noise, and tumbled out of the bunkhouse, the house was blazin' all over. We throwed lead at a coupla sidewinders hightailin' it away from here."

"But who would want to set it?" Slade asked.

Blakely swore some more, and shook his fist at the shadowy south.

"Them blankety-blank Injuns, who else!"

"Indians? Yuh mean there's Indians raidin' up from Mexico?"

Blakely shook his head.

"They live down at the head of the valley," he replied. "Where they always lived. Claim to own the land. Everythin's contrary wise in this blankety-blank section. Injuns ownin' land! An' all the land sloping to the head instead of to the mouth of the valley! Shore the Injuns set the fire. The other day we caught one of the blankety-blank bucks snoopin' around on our spread and give him a prime hidin'. This is their way of gettin' even."

"Fellers taking the law in their own hands usually make for trouble," Slade remarked. "Got any real proof the Indians set this fire?"

"Nope," Blakely admitted reluctantly. "Yuh never can prove anythin' on a Injun. The Old Man had a row with old Chief Mukwarrah over some unbranded stock a few months back, and there's been trouble hereabouts ever since. Plenty of stock has been widelooped."

"Any proof the Indians widelooped it?" Slade asked.

"There I gotcha!" Blakely replied triumphantly. "Nobody seed 'em do it and lived to tell about it, an' nobody found the beefs. But the only way yuh can run lifted steers outa this valley is south. There ain't a place, east or west, yuh can run 'em up through the hills. And there's a town at the mouth

of the valley it's plumb impossible to get a herd past without bein' spotted. The only way to avoid Concho-town is to go across the Injun range. Which means the Injuns musta lifted the stock, or was in cahoots with whoever did."

"Sounds reasonable," Slade admitted. "But still yuh haven't got proof that would stand up in a court of law."

"It won't have to stand up in a court by the time we're done with them hellions," Blakely promised grimly. "Say! I'll betcha while yuh was ridin' this way yuh heard drums!"

Slade nodded.

"I knowed it!" Blakely exulted. "Every time those low snakes cook up some deviltry, they beat those drums. They was heard early the night the Block A lost cows. And when the Walkin' Y lost part of their shippin' herd, they beat the night before. And when Baldy Yates of the Camp Kettle was drygulched, they beat the very same night. That's prime proof the Injuns set this burnin', if yuh heard drums."

A SPUTTER of cusswords told that old Cal Higborn had regained his senses. A few minutes later the CH owner got to his feet and hobbled over to thank Slade.

Higborn was a stocky, bristle-whiskered oldster pointedly at variance with his lanky, clean-shaven foreman. With an old Border-campaigner's efficiency, he immediately took charge of the situation.

"The ranchhouse is a goner," he growled, glaring with truculent blue eyes at the flame-spouting structure. "But there's plenty of sleepin' room in the bunkhouse. We got some dutch ovens and an old range in the stable. We can set 'em up to cook on. Plenty of pots and pans in there, too. See the storehouse didn't ketch, so we don't go short on chuck. We'll hafta sorta camp out till we can build a new *casa*. We'll start on that soon as the ashes cool on them foundations."

At his orders, the punchers went to work, setting up an improvised kitchen in the front part of the big barn. By the time they had completed his further orders, the fire was well on the way to burning itself out. Up until that time, Slade and two others kept a sharp watch on the roofs of the barn and other out-buildings on the chance that a stray brand might fire them also.

"Well, I reckon that's all we can do tonight," Higborn announced at length. "Figger we might as well grab a mite of shut-eye 'fore come mornin'. Things 'pear to be quietin' down."

But as the men headed for the bunkhouse, a clatter of hoofs sounded on the night air. The hoofs drummed swiftly louder, and a sweat-lathered horse flashed from the south, into the circle of the firelight. A wild-eyed cowboy rocked and reeled in the saddle. His face was stiff with caked blood and he appeared in the last stages of exhaustion.

"It's Harley Bell!" somebody yelled. "What in tarnation's the matter with you, Harley?"

The injured man was helped from his saddle, and steadied on his feet. He stared dazedly at the still burning ruin of the ranchhouse.

"The shippin' herd we was gettin' together," he mumbled, finally. "She's gone—widelooped. Purdy's dead—head bashed in. Musta hit me a glancin' blow—or I'd be dead too."

"What in blazes are yuh gabbin' about?" bellowed old Cal. "Shake yoreself together."

"Hellions slipped up on me and Purdy," Bell managed. "We was ridin' herd, and met under a tree while makin' our rounds. The tree set on the edge of brush. It was dark, with a blasted red moon seemin' to make it darker. I heard Purdy grunt, and I turned to see what was the matter, and somethin' hit me over the head. When I come to, the herd was gone. Purdy was layin' on the ground with the whole back of his head caved in. Happened not long after dark."

"It's past midnight now," somebody said.

"Them hellions got several hours start—then," Bell mumbled.

"And before we could get after them, they'd be out through the head of the valley and well on the way to *manana* land," Higborn remarked grimly. "Take Bell in, and wash his head and plaster it. Nothin' we can do tonight."

Again the cowboys headed for the bunkhouse, chattering angrily, and profanely blaming the Indians at the head of the valley.

But Walt Slade, whom the peons of the river villages named *El Halcon*—The Hawk—recalled a shadowy herd of cattle fleeing madly through the red light of a bloody moon, and was silent.

The concentration furrow was once more deep between his black brows.

CHAPTER III

Food For Buzzards

MORNING found the CH cowboys astir early. After quantities of steaming coffee, and a hot breakfast which the cook had thrown together on the old range in the barn, several of the men rode out to bring in the body of Purdy, the slain puncher. Old Cal Higborn called Slade aside.

"Yuh got the look of a tophand about yuh, son," he said. "I lost a good rider last night,

and that leaves me one short. There's a job open here if yuh'd care to sign on."

"Notion I will hang around for a spell," Slade replied thoughtfully. "Reckon yuh've hired a hand."

"Fine!" said Higborn. "I'm ridin' to town now to let the sheriff know what happened. Yuh can ride with me and look the range over on the way."

A wrangler brought the horses around, and they set out.

"It's four hours good ridin'," Higborn said. "We oughta make it by noon. But don't go lettin' that black of yores out. I've a notion there ain't many cayuses can stay nose to nose with him if he's in a hurry."

"Old Shadow can step a mite if he takes a notion," Slade admitted. "Say, this is nice looking range."

"It is good, when things are runnin' smooth," Higborn said. "Good grass, plenty of water. Canyons in the hills for shelter from sun and snow. With the right sort of neighbors, yuh'd be settin' pretty. But so long as them Injuns hold the head of the valley—"

He trailed off into profane rumblings.

Slade, gazing across the emerald billows of grass, dotted with thickets and groves and walled east and west by tall cliffs, was silent and thoughtful. He recalled Blakely's remark, of the night before, that the general slope of the land was toward the head of the valley rather than its mouth. The hill-locked valley was unusual in other ways. He estimated its width at thirty miles, the western cliffs being hazy with distance. The trail they were following, he noticed, veered steadily to the west in its northward trend.

"Section looks like it all of a sudden dropped down hundreds of feet sometime a million years back," he mused. "But even after ages of wear, those cliffs are still torn and ragged. No signs of a big stream having run here to cut the valley down through the hills, either. Wonder just what did bring it about?"

Slade, before the murder of his father by wideloopers and the subsequent loss of the elder Slade's prosperous ranch which set him to riding the dim trails that bordered outlawry, had had three years in a famous college of engineering. He was interested in geological formations. In the years that followed the interruption of his college training, he had kept up his studies after a fashion, and he knew more about geology than many a man who could write a degree after his name.

He was recalled to the present by old Cal's rumbling voice. Higborn was veering his horse into a track that cut the main trail

Flames were shooting from the roof of the ranchhouse

at a sharp angle. They had been riding some two hours and had covered about half the distance to the town at the valley mouth.

"Over west a mile is the Block O ranch-house," said Higborn. "I wanta stop and see Blaine Ollendorf a minute. Blaine owns the spread and is a pretty good feller."

AS THEY rode into the yard of the ranch-house, a man came out onto the porch to greet them.

"Hi, Blaine?" shouted Higborn. "Want a word with yuh."

Ollendorf was a big, massively built man with abnormally long and thick arms. A mane of tawny hair swept back from his broad brow and curled low at the back of his head. There were dark rings below his eyes, however, and the eyes themselves were bloodshot, Slade noted.

"What brings yuh down this way so early, Cal?" Ollendorf asked.

"Headin' for town to see the sheriff," Higborn replied. "Wanta come along?"

Ollendorf shook his head.

"Was to town yesterday," he said. "Got back just about dark and went right to bed. Was plumb tuckered out. Got up just a while ago. Wanta ride up to my south range soon as I've had a bite to eat. Join me in a helpin'?"

"We et early," Higborn replied. "I'll tell yuh what happened over to my place last night."

He regaled the Block O owner with a vividly profane account of the previous night's occurrences. Ollendorf clucked sympathetically, shaking his square head.

"And if it hadn't been for Slade here, I wouldn't be tellin' you about it," concluded Higborn. "I was sound asleep in my room upstairs when the shootin' outside woke me up. I was all groggy with smoke. The room was full of it. I managed to get to the door and open it. Fire was roaring up the stairs and along the hall. Had sense enough to shut the door, but that was about all. Tried to get to the window. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't see. Felt myself goin'. Never did get to the window. Next thing I knowed, I was layin' on the ground with the boys workin' over me. They told me what Slade had done, just like I told yuh. Yeah, I owe him plenty. Want yuh to know him. Shake hands with Blaine Ollendorf, Slade."

Ollendorf glanced keenly at The Hawk, an inscrutable look in his dark eyes, as they shook hands.

"Plumb glad to know yuh," he acknowledged heartily. "I'd have felt mighty bad if anythin' had happened to Cal. Mighty lucky yuh happened along so handy. Yuh say yuh're ridin' in to see Sheriff Fanshaw?" he asked Higborn.

"Uh-huh. And if Willis don't do somethin' about it pronto, I've a mighty good notion to take my boys and ride to the head of the valley and chase them Injuns clean to Mexico."

Ollendorf shook his head.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you, Cal," he said. "After all, yuh got no real proof old Mukwarrah and his bucks fired yore ranch-house and run off yore herd. Suspectin' ain't provin', yuh know, and yuh'll find yoreself up against the law if yuh try to run them Injuns off the land they own."

"What right they got to own land?" bellowed Higborn.

"The court over to the capital says they own it fair and square," Ollendorf pointed out. "Yuh know what happened when Baldy Yates tried to prove that land was part of the Camp Kettle spread. The courts said the old Spanish grant by which Mukwarrah got his title was plumb valid, and they upheld Mukwarrah's side of the arguin'."

"But if Baldy hadn't been drygulched and left with a slug through his head right after he started the suit, he'd have won out," declared the stubborn Higborn. "Baldy was smart and salty, and he'd have found a way. Mukwarrah knowed that, and that's why he had Baldy drygulched."

"No proof that Mukwarrah had anythin' to do with it," objected Ollendorf. "Baldy was plumb salty, as yuh say, and there was plenty of fellers who had it in for him. He had trouble over in the west rincon of the Big Bend before he came here. Folks over in that section are sorta good at holdin' grudges."

WALT SLADE took no part in this conversation. He sat perched on the porch railing, swinging one long leg, his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the rusty iron boot-scraper nailed to the end of the lowest step, apparently paying no mind whatever to what was said.

"Just the same, if somethin' ain't done pronto, I'm ridin' to visit Mukwarrah," finished Higborn. "And," he added grimly, "I won't have no trouble with the law afterwards, 'cause there won't be no witnesses against me. I've stood just about all I'm gonna stand."

Ollendorf changed the subject.

"By the way," he said, "do yuh need lumber to rebuild with? I got a coupla stacks yuh can have. Had quite a lot left when I finished my new barns. It'll save yuh a haul from Concho."

"That's just what I wanted to see yuh about," admitted Higborn. "It's mighty nice of yuh, Blaine. I'll send the wagons over tomorrow. Be seein' yuh."

Ollendorf nodded good-by to Slade, as they

turned to go. "Drop in any time yuh're ridin' hereabouts."

"Blaine's a mighty accommodatin' feller, even if he is loco where them Injuns is concerned," remarked old Cal as they rode back to the main trail.

Slade nodded, but made no comment.

The day had turned hot, and they rode more slowly now. An hour passed and they had covered somewhat less than the remaining distance to Concho, at the mouth of the valley. The trail had been constantly veering westward and now they were but a slight distance from the valley's precipitous west slopes.

Higborn kept up a constant chatter, and was heedless of his surroundings, but Slade spoke seldom, and his eyes were searching every thicket and jut of chimney rock they passed.

During his years of riding furtive trails, Walt Slade had learned to be watchful, particularly in a section where there were inexplicable happenings. And now, in a corner of his brain, a silent monitor was setting up a clamor. Slade had learned to heed that unheard voice, and had before now profited from its warnings.

Higborn was still grumbling about the Indians of Lost Valley. Abruptly his growling monotone was cut off as Slade's long arm swept him from the saddle and sent him crashing to the ground. Almost before he landed, Slade was beside him, crouched low, his heavy Winchester in his hands.

The long barrel flung up, and lined on a puff of smoke which at that instant wisped from bushes some distance up the slope.

Even as a bullet screamed over the startled horses' backs, Higborn saw Slade squeeze trigger, and fire spurted from the black muzzle of the saddle-gun. The crash of the report was an echo to the one slamming down from the slope.

The growth on the slope was violently agitated for a moment, then was still. There was no further evidence of movement in the veiling brush.

"Keep down," Slade's voice warned. "If I just winged him and he's still able to fang, we'll hear from him again if he manages to line with us."

For long moments they lay rigid, eyes fixed on the growth. Slade estimated the distance to a straggle of thicket on the valley floor at the base of the slope.

"I've a notion I can make it," he muttered. "If I can, I oughta be able to creep up the slope and mebbe get in back of the sidewinder, if he's still there. Worth a try, anyhow."

With the words, he was on his feet, crouching low, zigzagging to the thickets. But even as he dived into its shelter, a figure crashed into the brush alongside of him.

"Think I'm gonna hole up there like a gopher while you make a try for that hyderphobia skunk?" old Cal demanded indignantly. "I was a scout and doin' Border-fightin' before you was born. We're in this together."

"Okay," Slade chuckled, smiling down at the flushed face of the angry old-timer. "Take it easy, now, if yuh're comin' with me. If he's still up there and locates us, we're liable for a dose of lead poisoning before we can line sights on him."

HE QUICKLY realized, however, that old Cal could move through the brush as silently as himself. Slowly they wormed their way up the slope until Slade decided they were slightly higher than the spot from where the shot had come. Then they diagonalled to the south.

Abruptly, Slade laid a restraining hand on his companion's arm. Only a few yards distant was something huddled beneath a bush. They crept toward it, but the form remained motionless.

A moment later they were standing over it, guns ready.

"Done in, all right," Slade said.

"Shore is," Higborn agreed, jerking his thumb toward the black hole between the dead man's staring eyes. "Yuh drilled him dead center, son. How in blazes did yuh come to see him?"

"Saw the sunlight glint on his rifle barrel when he shifted it," Slade replied. "Had a notion this slope might bear a mite of watching. It's perfect for a drygulchin' of anybody riding the trail down there."

Old Cal peered at the face of the dead drygulcher, uncertainly seen in the shadow. Suddenly he swore an exultant oath.

"What'd I tell yuh?" he barked. "Look—it's a Injun, one of old Mukwarrah's Yaqui bucks, shore as yuh're a foot high!"

El Halcon squatted beside the dead man, examining the distorted face with calculating eyes. The drygulcher was undoubtedly an Indian. He was dark, with a broad, evil looking face. His mouth was a wide slit, his nose flaring and fleshy. He wore his straight black hair in a bank across his low forehead.

Slade turned to the chortling Higborn.

"Yuh say Mukwarrah and his bucks are Yaquis?"

"Uh-huh." Higborn nodded. "Every one of 'em. Come up from *Mejico* originally. Ornery mountain Yaquis, that's what they are. Well, they can't worm out of this one. This is one time those hellions is caught with the smooth-iron hot!"

Slade stared curiously at the dead man's lank hair. Now he turned again to Higborn.

"Cal," he said, as he straightened up. "I

don't like to mention it, but last night I sorta did yuh a favor."

"Yuh shore did," old Cal agreed emphatically.

"Well," said The Hawk, "I'd sorta like to ask yuh to do me one in turn."

"I promise even afore yuh ask," Higborn instantly answered. "Anythin' yuh ask. Half my spread, if yuh want it."

"Wouldn't know what to do with it if I had it," Slade smiled. "What I want yuh to promise is not to say anything to anybody about what happened here this morning, until I give the word."

Old Cal stared at him.

"I shore don't know what yuh're drivin' at," he sputtered, "and it sounds plumb loco to me, but I've passed my word, and I ain't never broke it yet."

"Okay," Slade agreed. "Now, let's see what this hellion has in his pockets. Might tell us something about him."

The contents of the dead man's pockets, however, held no significance. Slade appeared neither surprised nor disappointed.

"His horse oughta be somewhere around," he commented. "Mebbe we can find it."

They finally did locate the horse tethered in a dense thicket. It was a shaggy-coated, unkempt animal, unshod and unbranded. The rig was plain and bore no trademark.

Again Slade did not appear surprised. Without comment he got the trappings off the animal and turned it loose to graze.

"Can take care of itself, I figger," he told Higborn. "About half wild, as it is. Chances are it'll take up with some wild herd in the hills. Had oughta be plenty of that sort hereabouts."

"There are," agreed Higborn. "Gonna leave this feller lie?"

"For the present, anyhow," Slade replied.

"Reckon the buzzards will take care of him," Higborn predicted cheerfully.

"Yes," Slade agreed with peculiar emphasis, "I expect the buzzards *will* take care of him."

CHAPTER IV

Hangman's Noose

THE interview with Sheriff Willis Fanshaw in Concho proved to be a stormy one. Higborn stated his grievances and demanded justice. Sheriff Fanshaw was willing to oblige, but didn't see his way clear just how to go about it.

"I'll get a posse together and comb the hills for yore cows," he told the rancher, "but I can't go ridin' to Mukwarrah and accuse him of liftin' 'em, not without proof."

"Dang lot of chance yuh'd have of findin' 'em now," Higborn replied caustically. "Them cows are plumb to Mexico, and you know it. But if yuh don't do somethin' pronto, I'm gonna do some ridin' myself."

The sheriff flushed, and tugged at his mustache.

"Takin' the law in yore own hands won't get yuh anythin', Cal," he said. "Besides, last week I wrote Captain Jim McNelty over to Ranger headquarters to send along a troop to keep order in this section if necessary. Yuh don't hanker to buck McNelty's men, do yuh, Cal?"

"McNelty ain't got no troop of Rangers to send here right now, and you know it." Higborn nodded his head for emphasis. "He's plumb busy down along the Big Bend Border, and with them Bast outlaws what have been raisin' the devil over New Mexico way. Besides," he added shrewdly, "he'll tell yuh it's a matter for the local authorities to take care of, which it is. Betcha yuh ain't got no answer to yore letter."

The sheriff had to admit that he had not. Old Cal chortled derisively.

After leaving the sheriff's office, Slade and Higborn repaired to a saloon for a drink and chuck. While they were eating, two men entered and approached their table. Higborn greeted them as old acquaintances, and introduced Slade.

"This is Andy Ballou of the Walkin' F, and Thankful Yates, who owns the Camp Kettle," he introduced them to Slade. "Thankful come over from Arizona and took charge after his brother, Baldy Yates, was drygulched. Yuh heard me speak to Blaine Ollendorf about Baldy this mornin', Slade."

Andy Ballou was corpulent and cheerful. Yates was tall and thin. He had a hard face, a tight mouth, and calculating gray eyes. He packed two guns, and his movements were lithe and furtive. With a single swift, appraising glance he took in the broad-shouldered, lean-waisted Hawk from head to foot. His gaze lingered a moment on the two heavy black guns hung low in carefully oiled and worked cut-out holsters from double cartridge belts. His handshake was firm and cordial.

Ballou swore as old Cal outlined his misfortunes of the night before. Yates, evidently a taciturn individual, offered no comment other than a nod of his red head. Both invited Slade to drop in if he happened to ride in the neighborhood of their ranchhouse.

"Thankful is the black sheep of the Yates family, I reckon," Higborn observed as they headed back for the CH. "Baldy was just sorta gray-colored. Thankful got into a shootin' down in the Big Bend a few years back and had to light out till things cooled down. Was in Arizona when Baldy got

killed. Came back to take over the Camp Kettle. Seemed sorta sobered and has behaved hisself since he was here. He's pizen with them two guns, though, I'm told."

SLADE went to work for the CH, and quickly won the approval of both Blakely, the foreman, and the hands. Soon Blakely assigned him to the difficult and dangerous work of combing strays from the brakes and canyons of the west range. This was work to *El Halcon's* liking, for it gave him time for some investigations of his own. He spent much time in the gorges and canyons, examining them in the minutest detail.

One afternoon, beyond the south limits of the CH range, he was riding slowly along not far from the west wall of the valley. He was about to push through a fringe of thicket, when his eye caught something going on some distance ahead. Reining Shadow in, still in the concealment of the thicket, he lounged in the saddle and watched curiously the activities of a group of men who sat their horses under a large tree. Slade counted eight altogether.

As he watched, all but one of the men wheeled their horses and rode swiftly toward the western slope. The one remained, sitting his horse under the tree.

Slade watched the group until it vanished into the brush of the slope. Then his gaze returned to the single horseman, who still sat stiffly erect in the shade of the tree. His horse stood motionless, save for an occasional impatient stamp of a hoof or a switch of his tail.

"Is that jigger posing for a picture, or something?" Slade mused. "Hasn't moved an inch since the others left."

He spoke to Shadow and rode slowly toward the motionless man, casting an occasional glance toward the slope which had swallowed up his companions.

Still the man did not move. He sat lance-straight on his horse, staring straight ahead of him, his hands apparently resting on the pommel of the saddle.

As he drew nearer, Slade made out what looked like a thin black line running from the man's head to a branch of the tree. A little nearer, and suddenly he stiffened.

"Blazes!" he muttered. "Of all the devilish things to do!"

He swore under his breath as he realized the fiendishness of the thing. It was a savage refinement of cruelty.

The black line was a rope. One end was noosed about the man's neck. The other was fastened to the tree branch overhead. Slade could now see that his hands were bound in front of him. He was all set for a hangin', and hanged he would be, despite the departure of his executioners.

For the horse was not tied. Let it take a step forward and the man would be dragged from the saddle and left dangling by his neck. There he must sit, awaiting with nerves tortured to exquisite agony the inevitable happening. He might be able to keep the horse still with his voice for a while, but sooner or later the animal, driven by hunger or thirst or some wayward impulse, was bound to move.

SLADE was in a quandary. Any minute the horse might move. If he approached slowly, he might be too far off to reach the victim in time to save him, should the horse take a step. If he urged Shadow to speed, his approach might frighten the animal and cause it to run. After a swift calculation of the risks, he resolved on the former course.

Step by step the black horse moved forward. Slade could see the forward pricking ears of the other animal as it focused its gaze on the approaching black. It stamped nervously, tossed its head. The helpless man's lips moved. He was doubtless talking to his mount in low tones, endeavoring to allay its nervousness.

[*Turn page*]

Slade was still several hundred yards distant. The horse under the tree was showing more and more nervousness. Once it moved a little, and the dangling rope tightened. The man strained his head back to ease the pressure on his throat. His helpless fingers twitched spasmodically.

Step by slow step. *El Halcon's* face was bleak as the granite of the glowering cliffs. His eyes were cold as water under frozen snow. One slender hand dropped to the black butt of a gun.

The victim's horse was plainly frightened by the slow advance. Slade felt Shadow shiver as the other horse's nervousness was communicated to him.

The victim's horse raised a forefoot, stamped, twitched its tail, tossed its head. And still a hundred yards to go. The horse snorted, blowing prodigiously through its flaring nostrils. Slade saw its muscles tensed. And fifty yards yet to go!

The frightened horse snorted again. It plunged forward, went careening off across the range. Its rider was jerked from the saddle and left dangling in midair, his body writhing, his legs kicking convulsively.

Instantly Slade's hand flashed down and up. Clamped tight against his sinewy hip, the long black gun spouted flame. The reports blended in a veritable drumroll of sound as the Hawk shot at the rope.

Swiftly he counted the shots.

"One—two—three—four—five!"

The Colt rock-steady, he hesitated an instant on that last shot remaining, and squeezed the trigger. He gave a gasp of relief as the writhing body dropped through the air and thudded on the ground. The severed end of the rope snapped sharply up amid the branches.

"Trail, Shadow!" Slade's voice rang out. "Trail!"

The great black shot forward with the speed of light. Slade went out of the saddle with the mount still going at full gallop. He dropped beside the prostrate man and with frantic fingers ripped the tight noose from his swollen neck. His face was black with congested blood. The veins on his forehead stood out big as cords.

But the man's heart was still going, his lungs working. Gasping and retching, he fought for breath. The blood drained from his face, his lids fluttered. A moment later they raised, and steady black eyes stared up at Slade.

The man was an Indian. His face was aquiline and finely featured, though it was a network of wrinkles. His hair, hanging in a straight bang across his broad and high forehead, was white as mountain snow. His mouth was well formed and kindly.

"Take it easy, old-timer," Slade said. "Get yore breath back and rest a mite. Yuh came mighty nigh to makin' the Happy Huntin' Grounds that time."

The old man lay motionless for a few minutes, his unwinking black eyes still regarding the face of his rescuer. Then, with the assistance of Slade's arm, he raised himself to a sitting position.

"Mukwarrah thanks you!" he said.

CHAPTER V

The Phantom Herd

RELAXING comfortably on his heels, Slade rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand and proffered it to the old Chief. Mukwarrah accepted with a nod. Slade rolled another for himself and the two men smoked silently.

The Hawk's eyes constantly searched the western slope. Mukwarrah read his thoughts with native shrewdness.

"I do not think they will return," he remarked.

"Mebbe not," Slade admitted, "but no use taking chances." He rose, slid his Winchester from the saddle-boot and laid it on the grass beside him.

"It will be greatly to their misfortune if they risk themselves within range of *El Halcon's* guns," Mukwarrah commented.

Slade shot him a swift glance.

"How come yuh know me?" he asked.

"Many know you," the Chief returned quietly. "Especially those who are lowly or in need of help. You could be no other. This morning when I was in the town, I heard people saying *El Halcon* was riding for the Senor Higborn. Who first said it, no one seems to know, but the word is spoken by many now. I knew you not, but none but *El Halcon* could have shot as you shot when you severed the rope and saved my life."

With a smile, Slade lightly changed the subject.

"Yuh talk mighty good English, Chief," he said.

Mukwarrah nodded.

"I was educated in the San Vicente mission across the Rio Grande," he said.

"Yuh do talk English more like an educated Mexican than a Texan," Slade agreed.

The old Chief stood up, still slightly unsteady on his feet. Slade followed the direction of his glance.

"I'll fetch yore horse for yuh," he offered. "I see he's got over his scare and is grazing over there by the slope."

He caught the horse with little difficulty, and Mukwarrah mounted.

"Will you visit my village?" the Indian invited.

Slade considered a moment, glancing at the sun.

"We can reach the village before it is dark," Mukwarrah said.

"Okay."

They rode down the valley.

"How'd those hellions manage to tie onto yuh?" Slade asked.

"They roped me as I rode near the slope," Mukwarrah explained. "It was cleverly done. I was helpless before I could raise a hand."

"Recognize any of 'em?"

"They wore masks over their faces," the Yaqui replied.

"Happen to get a look at their hands?"

Mukwarrah shot him a quick glance.

"The hands of three were dark," he said.

"And I reckon it was them three that figgered out that cute little hangin' trick." The Hawk nodded. "They're good at that sort of thing."

Mukwarrah nodded grave agreement.

The sun was setting when they reached the site of the Indian village, and in the light of its level rays, Slade could see, in the far distance, the narrow gorge leading to the Rio Grande and Mexico.

The village, a group of well built lodges, was set on a little mesa rising considerably above the valley floor. Good crops were growing on cleared land and the range was dotted with grazing cattle. Slade saw numbers of horses and mules, and a fine herd of goats.

"We are peaceful folk here," Mukwarrah observed. "All we ask is to live in peace with our neighbors, and so we did do until recently. Now, we constantly fear trouble. The Senor Higborn, and others, think ill of us. He thinks we rustle his cattle."

"I've a notion he'll get over that 'fore long," Slade said.

"I hope so." Mukwarrah shook his white head sadly. "The charge is most untrue. My young men do not steal. I have reared them in the Faith of the good Fathers of the Mission. They obey the laws of their land, for it is their land, as it is the land of the Senor Higborn and his friends. They would fight and die for it if necessary."

"I've a plumb notion they would," Slade agreed with warmth. "And I've another notion—that the time will come when Higborn and his friends will sit in yore lodge as yore friends."

The old Chief gave him a long look.

"If *El Halcon* says it is so, then it is so," he remarked simply.

AFTER a bountiful supper in the Chief's lodge, Mukwarrah proposed the young men put on a tribal dance for their guest's pleasure. Slade knew that Indians, contrary to popular opinion, were not a solemn and silent people. Here was laughter and gaiety and sociability.

He enjoyed the dance greatly, knowing he was witnessing a spectacle few white men ever saw. One of the Indians owned a guitar, and after the dance was ended, Slade tuned the instrument to his liking and sang in a voice like the wind in the hilltop pines, like the rushing white water in the canyons, gay songs of the rangeland, and haunting Spanish melodies. His hosts sat spellbound as the great golden baritone-bass pealed and thundered in the light of the late moon.

It was past midnight when the celebration broke up and Slade went to sleep in the Chief's lodge.

"Mukwarrah," he said the following morning as he stood beside his saddled horse. "Mukwarrah, is there any other way out of this valley besides across yore range or by Concho-town?"

"Not that I have ever heard of." The Chief shrugged. "Not that it is impossible. But there has never been a need for another way out, so why should anybody look for one?"

When Slade reached the CH ranchhouse, in the late afternoon, he found the place in an uproar.

"A big herd was shoved off the Walkin' Y spread last night," Higborn told him.

"And them Injun drums was beatin' again," Tom Blakely added. "I tell yuh, Boss, we gotta do somethin'. I'm scared about our shippin' herd we're gettin' together. I can't keep the boys out there guardin' all the holdin' spots every night. But if we don't, them hellions is sure to run a bunch off. We can't afford to lose any more stock."

"We'll do somethin'," Higborn promised grimly, "and mighty soon."

A little later he drew Slade aside.

"Son," he said, "I was to town to see the sheriff again today. I found Willis pawin' dirt clean over his back. Appears folks there have been tellin' him you are *El Halcon*. Not that I give a hoot if yuh're John Wesley Hardin hisself, but I figgered yuh oughta know about it. I pinned Willis down, an' he admitted he didn't have any warrant for yuh and didn't know anybody what had. But he said folks allowed if yuh wasn't a owlhoot, yuh missed bein' one by the skin of yore teeth, and that yuh had killed more'n one man.

"I asked him if he ever heard tell of yuh killin' anybody what didn't have a killin' comin'. He like to swore the shingles off the roof. Then he hedged, and opined it was beside the point, that nobody had any right to take the law in his own hands, and that he had enough trouble as is, without a two-gun killer sashayin' around the section. I

allowed there wasn't much he could do about it. By the way, where was yuh last night?"

"Down in Chief Mukwarrah's village," Slade replied.

Old Cal's jaw dropped, and his eyes goggled.

"For Pete's sake, don't let anybody else know about it!" he sputtered. "If folks find out yuh was with them Injuns when Ballou's herd was widelooped, they'll—"

"Higborn," Slade interrupted, "that widelooped herd never went across Mukwarrah's range."

"Then where the—"

"Mukwarrah's bucks put on a tribal dance for me last night," Slade interrupted again. "The shindig lasted until long past midnight. It was bright starlight in the early evening, with a bright moon later on. No herd could a gone through the gorge and not been seen. All of Mukwarrah's young men were there when the dance busted up, and they were all there early this morning when I left. Yuh'll have to leave Mukwarrah out of this one."

"If you say that, I reckon I'll have to," Higborn admitted. "But if the Injuns didn't do it, who did?"

"That remains to be found out," Slade said. "I'm goin' to pound my ear for a spell. I want to ride over to the west range early tomorrow."

HE RODE the range very early the following morning. Before daybreak, in fact.

The level rays of the rising sun found him close to the western wall of the valley, riding very slowly northward. Along the base of the cliffs, his keen gaze intently searched the ground.

Mile after mile he rode, and found nothing. Then, some miles north of the confines of the CH range, where the overflow of a little spring formed a patch of marshy ground, he came upon a multitude of hoof-marks. Here and there, also, were the imprints of horses' irons.

"Might be just a bunch stopping here for a drink," he mused, scanning the ground, "but those prints are deep, and splayed out. Looks more like a herd siftin' sand mighty fast. Headed north, too, and the prints don't look very old."

He rode on, intent and watchful, but the thickly growing grass of the rangeland was impervious to the marks of passing hoofs. Once however, his quick glance noted a fresh white score on a slab of rock, the kind of scrape made by the slipping iron of a shod horse.

Several miles more, and in the cliff wall yawned the dark mouth of a narrow canyon. The floor was hard and stony, thinly grown with brush except along the walls. There were signs—cattle had from time to time entered the gorge.

"Not that it means much," the Hawk muttered. "Chances are there's water back in there, and the steers would naturally go for that. Still, some of these marks look fresh."

He turned into the canyon, which slashed the hills in a westerly direction. Soon he discovered there was water in the gorge—a good-sized spring gushing from under the rock wall and forming a stream which ran into the depths of the canyon.

Slade's eyes glowed.

"Sorta proves my theory about the geological formation of this section," he told himself. "The slope of this canyon is away from the valley, not toward it. I figgered I'd find something like this sooner or later."

With quickened interest he rode on, following the banks of the little stream. He had covered three miles when the stream began to broaden and overflow its banks. Soon Shadow was splashing through a small marsh of sticky black mud, grown with rank grasses. Slade's eyes lit up again as they rested on the dark surface of the bog.

The marshy ground was slashed and scored by a multitude of hoof-prints.

"Fresh, too," the Hawk said. "Not more'n forty-eight hours old."

The prints led into the gloomy depths of the canyon. Slade followed them, Shadow's hoofs sucking and splashing in the black mud. The stream continued to broaden and shallow. Finally the water vanished altogether, absorbed by the spongy ground, doubtless to drain off by some subterranean channel. The ground began to grow more firm, and farther on was replaced by hard, stony soil upon which the hoofs of the passing herd left no imprint. For a mile further Slade rode, then he abruptly reined Shadow in and sat staring. He swore under his breath with bitter disappointment.

Directly ahead was a sheer rock wall towering up against the blue of the morning sky. The canyon was a box.

"Looks sorta like the nice little house we built is all tumbled down, Shadow," he told the black horse. "A goat couldn't get up that rock, and the side walls all the way in are just as steep. Begins to appear that in here is just a watering spot for stray dogies, after all."

He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and sat frowning at the blank wall.

"Just the same, those hoof-marks back there didn't look like the prints of strayin' cows," he growled. "Looked a heap more like they were made by a herd being shoved along hard and fast. Has somebody found a way to sprout wings on beefs, or lizard legs? Appears sorta like it."

With a disgusted snort, he turned Shadow's

head toward the south wall of the canyon and rode slowly back the way he had come, examining the rock wall for some cleft or fissure he might have missed on his trip into the gorge.

The cliffs reared sheer, with thick, tall chaparral at their base. Slade eyed the growth, searching for signs of the phantom herd having brushed against it in passing. But the close bristle stretched unbroken as the rock wall towered above it.

Abruptly he reined in, his eyes narrowing. The stretch of growth he was just passing stood straight and tall, but there was a withered look about the leaves on the topmost branches, a tinge of yellow at variance with the fresh green on either side. For perhaps a dozen feet this peculiar manifestation was evident.

His eyes glowing with excitement, Slade slipped from the saddle. Through his mind ran stories of owlhoot tricks told by old, Border peace-officers. He approached the growth, broke off a branch of one of the bushes. It snapped sharply in his fingers.

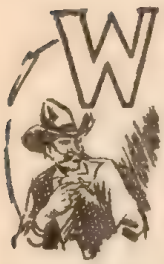
"Dry," he muttered. "Dead and dry!"

He stopped, seized the gnarled trunk with both hands and tugged sharply. The trunk slid easily out of the ground. It had no roots. Its base was a sharpened stake!

Slade tossed the bush aside, seized another. A moment of tugging and he had a gap in the growth a couple of yards in width. Through it shone the cliff wall, and in the wall yawned a dark opening!

CHAPTER VI

The Trap Is Sprung



WORDLESSLY, Slade stared at the cave mouth. He shoved his wide hat back on his crisp black hair and gave a low whistle.

"An old trick!" he exclaimed aloud, "but a good one! Cut out the brush, then stick it back in the ground after yuh pass through the gap. That way there's no broken branches or tramped down bush. Anybody ridin' through here would never suspect that cave in the cliff. Would never notice the break in the growth unless they were looking mighty sharp and had a good notion what they were looking for.

"Wouldn't have noticed it myself if those hellions hadn't got careless and neglected to replace the withered bushes with fresh ones. That's the way with the owlhoot breed—always overlookin' some mite of a thing. Not much, a few withered leaves, but enough to make a jigger stretch rope. Shadow, I'll bet yuh a hatful of pesos that cave is a tunnel runnin' right straight through the hill and into a gorge or valley on the far side. And in that gorge will be a trail leading south. Let's you and me go and see. Wait a minute, though. It's dark in there, and the going is apt to be rough."

He searched about amid the growth until he found some pieces of dry resinous wood. Lighting one for a torch, he led Shadow to the mouth of the cave.

The sides of the cave were smooth and water-worn, its floor carpeted with fine silt sprinkled with pebbles and small, rounded boulders. Slade nodded with satisfaction.

"Just what I figgered we'd find sooner or later," he said. "A waterway through the hills. Uh-huh, that's the old bed of a stream that once ran through here, a mighty long time back, when this section was different from what it is now. And look at the hoof-marks in that silt! Plenty of cows been shoved through this hole."

He mounted, and rode into the cave, holding his torch high. Shadow's irons clattered loudly on the boulders, but the floor had a slight slope and was devoid of pitfalls. For a mile, Slade rode through thick darkness that was relieved only by the flickering flame of his torch. Then, suddenly, he saw light ahead.

Five minutes more and he was sitting his horse in the far mouth of the tunnel. Before him stretched a narrow gorge trending in a southerly direction. Down the middle of the gorge ran a trail that showed evidence of recent travel.

"Uh-huh," he nodded with satisfaction. "This is their private back door to *manana* land and a market for widelooped beefs."

With a final glance at the gorge, which flowed southward for as far as his eyes could reach, he turned back into the tunnel. Reaching the canyon once more, he carefully replaced the cut brush, making sure all was as before. Then he rode swiftly to the canyon mouth and headed for the CH ranchhouse.

Old Cal was working at his desk when Slade entered. He looked up, glowering from under his bushy brows.

"Now what?" he demanded. "Somethin' else bust loose?"

Slade drew up a chair. He was fumbling at a cunningly contrived secret pocket in his broad leather belt. He laid an object on the desk in front of the ranch owner.

Cal Higborn stared, his jaw sagging. The object was a silver star set on a silver circle, the honored, feared and respected badge of the Texas Rangers!

THE old rancher gasped.

"A—a Ranger! Yuh—yuh're a Ranger!"

"Figger to be," Slade smiled. "Undercover man for Captain Jim McNelty. Captain Jim

got Sheriff Fanshaw's letter, and sent me over here to have a look-see at what was going on."

"And yuh're here to hawgtie them Injuns!" Higborn crowed happily.

"I'm here to hawgtie the gents who've been doin' the wideloopin' and general mischief in this section," Slade corrected with emphasis. He slid the silver badge back into its secret pocket. "Remember, if folks in general knew *El Halcon* was a Ranger, my value to the outfit would be cut down quite a mite."

Higborn nodded his appreciation of the fact.

"What yuh aim to do?" he asked.

Slade quickly answered with a question of his own.

"Yuh got two holdin' herds all ready to join tomorrow and shove to the shipping pens in town, Cal, one on yore north range, and one on yore south. Right?"

"That's right," Higborn agreed.

"Figgering as yuh do, that yore beefs have been rustled through the south end of the valley, which herd will yuh guard careful tonight?"

"The herd on the south range, of course," Higborn replied instantly.

"Right," Slade nodded. "With that herd well guarded and the boys all on the job, nobody could run the north herd past them, either. That way, both herds would be safe. And I've a hunch," he added with meaning, "that some other gents are gonna figger all that out just like I'm tellin' yuh. I figger they won't be able to resist that big herd of fat beefs worth a heap of *dinero*. While yuh're keeping yore eyes skinned on yore south herd, they'll be plumb busy shovin' the other herd down Mexico way, without a chance of having a loop dropped on them."

"But how in blazes—" Higborn began.

"I'll tell yuh," Slade interrupted.

Briefly he outlined what he had discovered in the hills.

"Been looking for just some such thing," he explained. "I figgered first off, from the geological formation of this valley, there should be some old waterways through the hills, naturally by way of one of the canyons. Mebbe a million years back, the floor of this valley was considerable higher than it is now, which means that its side canyons sloped out of the valley instead of into it. Water must have run through those canyons to the west and south in those days. Then came a mighty big and sudden sinking and the valley floor dropped to where it is now. Most of the old waterways got closed up since then, but I figgered mebbe one might still be in existence. There is, and by way of that, cows have been run out of this valley."

Higborn shook his head unbelievingly.

"How in blazes did yuh figger it out?" he asked.

"The night I rode into this section, I saw a herd being pushed along mighty fast—to the *north*. I figgered at the time it looked funny. Then when Harley Bell rode in with his head busted and told about the wide-looping, I was plumb shore the herd I saw was yores. It was, as I said, headed north. That's what started me thinking of another way out of this valley.

"Now let's get busy. Have all the boys ride out to the south holding spot before dark. Those hellions will be keeping a sharp watch on what's going on. Then, after it is good and dark, we'll slip the boys away, all except a couple to keep the fires going and make it look like everybody is on the job at the south holding spot. The rest of us will sneak into that canyon and see what happens. I'm willing to bet a hatful of pesos that before come daylight tomorrow, there won't be any more rustling to worry about in Lost Valley."

"But if the Injuns ain't doin' it, who is?" demanded old Cal as he stood up and buckled on his gun.

"I've got a good notion, but I'm not saying until I'm plumb shore," Slade replied. "We'll know before morning."

WHERE the cut brush hid the mouth of the cave, the canyon was dark and silent, with a silence broken only by the mournful sighing of the wind in the leaves. Nothing moved amid the shadows.

Then, faint with distance, sounded the wailing bawl of a tired and disgusted steer. The querulous bleats drew nearer, were undertoned by the low rumble of many hoofs. Moving shadows loomed in the starlight. There was a creaking of saddle leather, a jingle of bit irons, as men dismounted and began removing the cut brush.

Suddenly light flickered, burst into a dazzling glare as oil-soaked brush flamed fiercely. The red light beat on the faces of the CH cowboys, standing grim and ready, guns out. It beat on the faces of the amazed rustlers, and on the square head and livid face of Blaine Ollendorf, standing a little to one side of his men, directing the movements.

In the tense hush, Walt Slade's voice rang out, edged with steel:

"Yuh're caught settin'! Don't reach! Get yore hands up!"

With a yell of fear and fury, Ollendorf went for his gun. Slade shot him before it cleared leather. The man reeled, pitched forward onto his face, writhed over on his back. The canyon rocked and bellowed with a roar of six-shooters.

It was all over in a minute. Caught by surprise, the demoralized wideloopers didn't have a chance. Almost instantly, four of their

number were stretched on the ground. The others threw down their guns and howled for mercy.

"Tie 'em up," Slade ordered tersely. He knelt beside the dying Ollendorf, who glared up at him with filming, hate-filled eyes.

"Cursed swine!" he hissed through the blood frothing his lips. "So you're cleaning up, per usual!"

Slade slowly shook his head, and held before his eyes the gleaming silver star.

"No," he said quietly, "Just the *Law* cleaning up—per usual!"

Ollendorf stared, struggled to rise.

"Dang!" he gasped. "A Ranger!"

Blood poured from his mouth. His head fell back, and he was dead.

The CH punchers secured their prisoners, rounded up the recovered herd, and headed for home. Slightly in the rear, Slade rode with old Cal.

"I never woulda believed it of Blaine Ollendorf," said Higborn, shaking his head. "How come yuh to figger him in the first place, Slade?"

"Didn't have much to go on at first," The Hawk admitted. "Just some mud on a boot scraper. Recollect the morning we rode up to his place? Ollendorf took good care to tell us he'd been in bed sleeping all night, and hadn't yet been out of the house. But there was black mud on his boots, and fresh black mud on the scraper. And his eyes had the look of a man who had been up all night and doing a heap of hard riding.

"I figgered the mud on the scraper must have come from Ollendorf's boots, and I couldn't help but wonder where he'd picked it up. Mostly red soil hereabouts, yuh know. And why should he lie about being out during the night? Looked funny. Then when that hellion drygulched you and me by the slope, I did some hard thinking. Ollendorf was the only person we'd spoken to all morning, the only person so far as I could see, who knew we were heading for town.

"Yuh'll recollect the trail makes a wide arc from his place, curving west until it reaches the west slope. Straight across Ollendorf's range would be a heap shorter than around the curve. A jigger slipping away from Ollendorf's ranchhouse as soon as we were out of sight over the bulge could easy make it to the slope ahead of us, hole up and wait until we came along. Which, I figger, is just what happened. I caught a funny look in Ollendorf's eyes when he first saw me, a surprised look. I figgered right off he'd recognized me as *El Halcon*. That was okay, but why should he be so anxious to put me out of the way in a hurry?"

"Because, knowin' about you and yore reputation, he figgered yuh were here to bust up his game," old Cal shrewdly deduced.

"Right," Slade agreed.

"But why did the hellion take up for the Injuns all the time? Looks like he woulda wanted to help make folks suspicious of them."

THE HAWK shook his head.

"Was smarter the other way. The natural thing for a guilty jigger was to cast suspicion on somebody else. Ollendorf did the opposite, which really helped put him in the clear. I figger, though, that if things had showed up that proved Mukwarrah and his bucks couldn't be guilty, he would have managed in some way to get folks to looking sideways at Thankful Yates, who's sorta under a cloud."

"Why did yuh figger first off the Injuns didn't have anythin' to do with it?"

"First off, because of that drum beating you fellers made so much of," Slade chuckled. "That was just another of Ollendorf's tricks. Cal, I know somethin' about Indian customs. About the only time they do any drum beating is when they are having a shindig, or when they're starting on the warpath. Indians are just like the rest of us. If they have any skulduggery in mind, they don't go advertising it. I reckon yuh're like most folks who live next door to Indians, yuh never take the trouble to find out anything about them or their customs."

"I'm goin' to," old Cal declared emphatically. "Come tomorrow, I'm ridin' down to Mukwarrah's place to eat crow. Reckon I plumb owe him a apology."

"Reckon yuh do," Slade agreed. "And I've a notion yuh'll get along prime with him. He's a fine old gent."

"What about that Injun who drygulched us? And we got three more of the same sort ridin' ahead there with their hands roped."

"That drygulchin' gent was an Apache breed, with his share of white blood, which mebbe is what made him so onery," Slade replied.

"How'd yuh know that?"

"Didn't have the look of a Yaqui, like yuh said Mukwarrah's tribe was. He'd cut his hair Yaqui style, but when he fell there with his head hanging over, there was a plain sign of a part on the left side. No Yaqui ever parts his hair. I knew right then he couldn't belong to Mukwarrah's outfit, which tied up with what I was already thinking. Ollendorf slipped in a few breeds to ride with his wide-loopers, so if anybody happened to get a look at the outfit operating, they'd figger first off it was Mukwarrah's Indians."

"Wonder why they tried to hang old Mukwarrah, like yuh told me about?"

"Part of the scheme to set outfits against each other. That's an old owlhoot trick, and it usually works. Get a coupla outfits on the

prod against each other, and pronto they blame each other for any skulduggery what's going on. Which makes it pie for the owlhoots. That's why they set yore ranchhouse afire, though that was possibly done, too, to distract attention from the widelooping the same night. That herd was sorta close to the ranchhouse when it was shoved off, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Yuh figger Ollendorf was responsible for Baldy Yates' drygulchin'?"

"Wouldn't be surprised. Mebbe Yates might have been smart enough to fenagle old Mukwarrah's land away from him. Ollendorf wouldn't want that to happen, of course. Well, I reckon that's about all. Wanta be gone in the morning afore the sheriff comes out rarin' about folks who take the law in their own hands."

Old Cal gazed across the moonlit prairie, and smiled complacently.

"Yeah, it's a plumb pretty range," he said. "A fine place to live, with good neighbors livin' all around yuh. But I'll be almighty sorry to see you ride off, son."

"Cap Jim's got another mite of a chore ready for me by now," Slade replied. "Mustn't keep him waiting."

He rode away the following morning, tall and graceful atop his black horse. He had uncased his guitar, and back to old Cal came the merry tinkle of the strings, and the music of a rich, sweet voice singing:

Oh, there ain't no gals like Texas gals,
That's what I'm here to say,
With their faces golden-freckled by the sun;
So I'm headin' back for Texas,
Yes, I'm headin' back today,
And, boys, I'm glad my shippin' chore is done!

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Walt Slade battles the ruthless renegades of Bleached Bones Crossing in

THE PECOS TRAIL

Another Exciting El Halcon Novel by BRADFORD SCOTT Next Issue!

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NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN

By BUD WILKS

Tom March and Ike Tolson get a new slant on an old feud

IF THERE was one thing that old Ike Tolson resented more than anything about young folks it was their youth. Not that the ranch cook was so very ancient, but these last few years since his game leg had prevented him from holding down a regular riding job with the outfit, he hotly resented the young cowhands around the place.

Ike Tolson

"Just kids without a thimble full of brains in the whole pack of them," he would snort. "We had more sense in my day."

"That ain't the way I heard it," Matt Green, the owner of the outfit would always say. "You shore did some loco things when you were younger, Ike."

When he heard that Tolson would shut up and act as if he were sorry he'd mentioned it at all. He wasn't more than fifty and still could take care of himself when it came to a fight with fists or guns, but he just couldn't be comfortable on a horse on account of his stiff leg.

The Bar G was a good outfit and most of the waddies working there weren't as young as Ike Tolson would like to have folks think. Up to early spring, that year, there wasn't a man on the place who was under twenty-five. Then one day the boss showed up with a new cowhand.

"I don't believe it," the cook moaned when he saw the new member of the outfit. "You keep on gettin' 'em younger around here, Boss, and we'll have six-year-olds ridin' hobby hosses roundin' up the stock."

Tom March did look mighty young, though he was past twenty. He was a big easy going sort of waddy with a friendly grin, and just seemed an overgrown kid. The Old Man knew what he was doin' when he hired March, though, for the "Kid," as the whole outfit got to calling him, turned out to be a tophand.

There was something else about the Kid which made Tolson resent his presence with the outfit from the start. It might have been that Tom March reminded Ike too much of his own younger days and he hated the Kid because he was no longer like him. Tolson never had been a man to grow old gracefully.

A ranch cook can do a lot to make a waddy in the outfit uncomfortable if he sets his mind to it, and Tolson did just that. The Kid got to finding his coffee was cold on chilly mornings, and his flapjacks leathery, and his food just not quite what it should be.

The boss didn't know anything like that was going on. Matt Green wouldn't have stood for it for five minutes. But Tom March wasn't one to complain. He believed in fighting his own battles.

"Startin' tomorrow mornin' I expect to find my coffee good and hot," he told Tolson, after he found he'd had just about enough of the cook's foolishness. "And the rest of the grub must be fit for a man to eat."

"What man?" demanded Tolson. "You shore don't call yourself that do you, sonny?"

"Maybe not," said the Kid. "At least I don't aim to try and raise one of them soup strainer mustaches like you got in order to prove I am a man, Cookie."

FOR a moment Tolson just glared at him—so mad he wasn't able to speak. In the

first place he was proud of his mustache, and in the second place he hated to be called "Cookie."

"Remember to have my coffee warm," said March as he left the cook shack. "If yuh don't there's goin' to be trouble, and I ain't foolin'."

That evening when the outfit rode in after a day of hard work rounding up strays and getting ready for spring roundup, Tolson had a good hot meal ready for everybody. The Kid seemed puzzled when he found there wasn't a thing wrong with his food. It was the best meal Tom March had had for a week.

"Looks like Ike has declared a truce or something," Tom March muttered as he finished and moved back in his chair. "Something mighty strange about this. It just ain't natural."

The cook was close enough to hear him but Tolson didn't pay any attention. He seemed to have something more important on his mind.

The Bar G was a bachelor outfit so Matt Green ate in the cook shack with his men. The ranch owner pushed back from his place at the head of the table and filled and lighted his pipe.

"Heard in town that the Overland stage was held up and robbed again yesterday," Green announced. "That's the third time it's happened in the last two months."

"The robbers get much?" asked "Lanky" Carr, the foreman of the outfit.

"Some money from the passengers and a shipment of gold from the Yellow Nugget Mine," answered the owner of the Bar G. "Dave Lance is fit to be tied. Says he just can't seem to get the gold through safely."

"Bet I'd find some way to get it through if I was driving the stage or even aetin' as guard," said March.

"You!" snorted the cook who had been an interested listener. "It takes an older man with brains to handle a job like that."

"You two just talked yoreselves into it," said Green. "I told Dave Lance that I'd lend him a couple of my men and a wagon and see if they couldn't get the gold through safely to the railroad town."

"What's that got to do with me and Tolson, Boss?" asked the Kid.

"You two are goin' to handle that wagon," Green said. "You start for the mine the first thing in the morning."

"Suits me," said Tolson. "Though I kind of wish I had a better man sidin' me."

"That goes double," said March.

A little later that night a couple of strangers stopped at the ranch. They rode good horses and their saddles and bridles were made of good leather that had seen a lot of use, but they were a couple of hard faced men with the stamp of gunsharps written all over them.

"I'm Ed Smith," said one of the men. "This is my partner, Joe Jones."

"We ain't seen much of John Doe lately," said March. "Wonder what become of him?"

Of course the Kid meant that he didn't believe the two strangers had told their real names, but they didn't appear to realize what he was talking about. Smith and Jones ashed if they could have some food and Tolson took them into the cook shack to dish them up something.

After the two men had eaten they got their horses and rode away. The whole outfit was glad to see them go for there was something about Smith and Jones that the Bar G crew didn't like at all. The ranch felt more comfortable without the presence of those two hard-eyed riders.

"Looked like a couple of killers to me," said Marsh. "Wonder if those jaspers could be the ones that have been holding up the stage and stealin' the gold shipments?"

"Them two shore had you all fooled to a fare-you-well," said the old cook with a grin. "They happen to be a couple of lawman searching for a wanted outlaw. They told me all about it while they was eatin'."

"And I'll bet you talked their ears off," said Lanky Carr.

"I did not," protested Tolson. "You didn't see any ears missin' when they left, did you? I told them that them robbers would shore be fooled the next time they held up the stage."

"Now you've done it, Cookie," said the Kid in a disgusted tone. "If them two are really outlaws, instead of lawmen like you believe, you've shore talked us into gettin' killed, pronto."

The Kid didn't say much after that, and the whole outfit turned in for the night. The next morning Tolson and March hitched a team to the ranch wagon and headed for town. Green had planned things with the owner of the Yellow Nugget Gold Mine so that the Bar G men would not even go there.

THE cook and the Kid had their orders to pick up the gold shipment in town at the express office. It was to be crated like a box of drygoods for the ranch. The wagon was supposed to start back for the ranch with a load of supplies but after they left Festival behind them, Tolson and March were to head for the railroad town twenty-five miles to the north and deliver the gold.

"Might be a good idea if we take a look around town for yore friends Smith and Jones before we even go near the express office," suggested March when the two men

reached the edge of the little cowtown with the wagon. "I don't trust those two jaspers any."

"They told me they were lawmen and I still believe it," insisted Tolson. "The trouble with kids like you is that you are always so suspicious of folks that you know nothin' about."

Tom March didn't argue about it. So far the cook's attitude had been almost friendly, and the Kid aimed to keep it that way, if he could.

They left the wagon in front of the general store and searched the town in a casual fashion, but they saw no sign of the two strangers. Finally they decided there was no use delaying any longer. Tolson got what supplies they need for the ranch at the general store and then they picked up the shipment of gold at the express office.

The gold did not seem as heavy as they had thought it would be when they lifted the packing box into the back of the wagon. The Overland was just pulling out, kicking up a cloud of dust as it rolled along the road that led northward.

"Reckon we're all set, Kid," said Tolson. "Let's get going."

The cook picked up the reins as he climbed up on the seat of the wagon. March seated himself beside Tolson. They rumbled out of town with the team moving at a slow pace. They had no desire to have anyone think they were in a hurry.

Half an hour later they reached the spot where they would turn off the main road in order to head for the ranch, but Tolson kept the team going straight ahead, much to the surprise of the horses who were used to taking the other route.

Finally they reached a spot where brush and rocks were thick on either side of the road. The wagon rumbled on, the horses moving faster now. Suddenly March uttered a shout as he glanced back.

Two horsemen were galloping in pursuit of the wagon and coming fast. Tom March drew his gun and swung around so that he was kneeling on the wagon seat. He fired as one of the riders drew close enough to send a bullet in his direction.

"Got him!" shouted March as he saw one of the horsemen tumble out of the saddle. "Now if I can just down this other jasper we'll be doing all right."

The second horseman's gun roared as he drew closer. The bullet grazed March's shoulder and nearly knocked him off the seat of the wagon. Tolson was driving, keeping the horses going at a wild gallop and the cook did not even look back over his shoulder.

Again March fired and the bullet got the second rider. He grabbed for the saddle horn as his feet kicked out of the stirrups and then he landed in the dust to sprawl there motionless.

"Got them both," exclaimed Tom March delightedly as he swung around on the seat. "What the devil!"

Up ahead two more riders had suddenly loomed into view. March raised his gun, but a shout from Tolson made him lower the weapon.

"Those two are lawmen," said the cook. "Don't yuh see the badges pinned on their shirts?"

Tolson halted the wagon as the two riders drew closer. March stared at them in wide-eyed amazement as he saw it was Smith and Jones.

"Nice work, boys," said Smith. "You got both of the stage robbers. We figgered they would show up further along the road and were waiting for them there. We found out the express agent has been working with the bandits tipping them off when a gold shipment was going through."

"That's right," said Jones. "And we fooled them this time. He thought you were carrying the gold on the wagon, so the bandits let the stage go through without bothering it this time."

"You mean we haven't got the gold?" demanded March in amazement.

"Of course not," said Deputy Marshal Jones. "You were just decoys. We were going to appear and get the robbers when they held you up but you shore beat us to it."

"Seems to me that we've been fooled," said Tolson smiling at March. "It don't matter whether you are young or old there is always something new you can learn. I'm sorry about the way I treated you, Tom."

"And that goes double," said the Kid, grinning.

●

A gold-carrying stage-coach is menaced by gun-hung hombres of the mining country in

THE LAST STAGE OUT

A Drama-Packed Novelet by STEPHEN PAYNE *Next Issue!*

BEEFLEGGER'S LUCK

By SYL MacDOWELL

When the irrepressible wandering waddies suddenly collide with a Black Market set-up, there's no ceiling on trouble for everybody concerned!

CHAPTER I

Jackpine Trouble

ALONG the crest of the Oregon Cascades runs a skyline trail, from Crater Lake to Mt. Hood. It penetrates utterly primitive country, so few travelers use it. But that was precisely the reason "Swap" Bootle and "Whopper" Whaley chose it. The skyline trail touched no town or settlement, so they felt that in that timberland wilderness the chance was slim they would run into jobs.

The two leather-loading roamers were headed aimlessly northward, and the season was late June. Although they were fugitives from work, they looked like cowpunchers. They rode with the loose, lazy ease of the range-bred and their horses bore the same unmistakable stamp of cow-country upbringing.

The partners were two contrasting oddments of humanity. Swap was short, round and sunny-faced and rode a freakish steed he called a bay-sorrel, it having a black mane and silver tail.

Whopper was a long-legged, gloomy person aboard a hayburner best described as a cheese-colored roan. The kind of cheese speckled with mold.

Swap

On their saddle cantles, cowboy-style, the drifting do-nothings packed slicker-wrapped soogan rolls containing their few personal possessions, also a meager supply of grub, as well as a stock of Whopper's inevitable plug-cut chewing tobacco.

Whopper carried a slab of it in his hip pocket now and as he and his partner rounded the base of a lava butte he fanged off a cud with an empty sigh.

"Don't know as if I can stand this high altitude," he remarked sadly.

Swap gave him a troubled glance.

"Bother yore heart?"

"Nope, my stummick. Gives me such a appetite I could plumb starve between meals."

The broad hint was not lost on Swap. It wasn't noon yet, But they had breakfasted early. So in his usually amiable manner he suggested:

"S'pose we eat when we come to a good camp-spot."

With that, Whopper touched the cheese-colored roan with a dangling spur.

Past the butte, he and Swap dipped into a broad basin where the cinnamon-colored bark of giant ponderosa pines gave a wierd amber hue to the softened sunlight penetrating their crowded tops. A light green splash of quaking aspens marked the location of a spring. The waddies stepped stiffly from leather and lowered their packs.

Clearing a space in the thick carpet of pine needles, they built a fire and brought their lard bucket coffeepot to a boil. They opened a can which was part of a broken lot they had bought at cut rates, because the labels had peeled from them.

These unlabelled cans furnished interesting diversion and sometimes a pleasant surprise. But luck was against them now in this gastronomic lottery. The can turned out to contain creosote roof paint. This was of no use to men who had no roof over their heads. So they threw it into the fire and took another can.

"It splashes like peaches," Whopper guessed as he set the container on a flat rock and jabbed it with the can opener.

But it turned out to be sour pickles.

A Hilarious Swap and Whopper Novelet

He gave a powerful jerk and Whopper came unglued from the saddle

Pickles sluiced down with black coffee didn't make a very substantial meal, but Swap and Whopper were used to short rations and the pickles convinced their stomachs they had dined. After which they packed up and rode on. They felt better than if they had eaten roof paint, anyhow.

In making camp, they had left the trail. The trail was, at best, no broad, well-trodden bridle path. They jogged to an ax-blazed tree which they thought they remembered, went on to the scarred bark of another, but the trail wasn't there. Not until the ground ahead of them plunged into a dense thicket of jackpine did they realize they had strayed.

THE skyline trail, dim and almost trackless, was indicated at intervals by blazes slashed by rangers. The forestry service blazemark was a broad slash with a notch above it. This particular vicinity, however, was infested by bark-gnawing porcupines. It began to dawn on Swap and Whopper that some pestiferous porky had been going around marking trees in a way almost identical with the dot-dash forestry trail sign. This had made it easy for riders stuffed with hot coffee and cold pickles to be misled.

A scrutiny of a gnawed tree revealed this belated information to Swap. He grinned ruefully.

"Reckon we better turn back?"

"And lose two-three miles?" objected Whopper.

"What of it? We ain't goin' nowhere."

"It's agin my principles to chase back an' forth along the same groove, like city folks do. Break a rule once and next thing yuh know yuh'll be bustin' it regular. That undermines the character."

Swap felt that his lean, lazy sidekick didn't have enough character to worry about. Not enough to argue about, even.

"If yuh figger yuh can poke through them jackpines and come back on the trail, go ahead," he said.

So Whopper took the lead, prodding his unwilling horse deeper and deeper into the tangle.

Oregon jackpine is the poor relation of the timber family. It is stunted, spindly growth. But what it lacks in girth and height it makes up in density. Being shallow-rooted in pumice soil, it topples easily in wind and storm. The result is a scramble of standing trees interlaced with deadfall that resembles spilled matches on a giant scale.

Into such a maze Whopper penetrated until he could ride no farther. Then he dismounted and battered his way until he was breathless and ripped by snags. He halted in exhaustion.

About that time Swap, who wormed along behind him, made a shocking discovery.

"My soogan roll, it's gone!"

"Gone where?" barked Whopper.

"Reckon it tore loose from my saddle! Back yonder somewheres, gosh knows how fur!"

"Yuh reelize that most all our grub was wrapped in it?"

"Shore do! If you wasn't so dead set agin turnin' back, mebbe we might find it!"

"It'd be a heap better to make tracks for more grub!" croaked Whopper. "Findin' that soogan roll would be like lookin' for a needle in seventeen dozen haystacks!"

"Making tracks" wasn't as simple as it sounded. Whopper gazed around in growing alarm. He felt like a cornered checker. It was possible to see only a few yards in any direction, and there was a dire possibility of wandering aimlessly for hours, even for days.

IT WAS as depressing as a prison, for it was almost sunless in the thicket, and Whopper had lost his sense of direction. A woodpecker rapped on a deadtop. A chipmunk chittered from a rotting snag with a sound resembling a derisive snicker. There was a rumble of thunder off somewhere. A thin whine sounded at his ear and Whopper slapped at a mosquito. He was aware all at once of stings on his neck and wrists. Presently both he and his partner were slapping at swarming, hungry insects.

"If yuh don't find some way out o' this mess, we'll get et up alive!" groaned Swap.

Whopper fought a panicky sensation that gripped his skinny throat and turned his mouth too dry to chew tobacco, which was his usual source of inspiration. The cheese-colored roan nickered a soft plea and nudged his shoulder. He gripped its warm neck and wished he had let the animal have its head, instead of forcing it into this trap.

"Mebbe we better backtrack," he said feebly.

"What about yore character?" Swap asked testily.

"Well, character ain't no use to a man when he's dead. And if we want to keep on livin', we got to—"

"Listen!" breathed Swap.

The sound came plainly, from somewhere on ahead. It was a sound familiar to range-trained ears. It was the bawling of a cow. It was followed by the upraised voice of a man.

The man was swearing. The oaths were blood-curdling, or would have been in ordinary circumstances. Just now they sounded like sweet music. Taking new hope, Whopper crashed toward the unseen owner of that rich vocabulary.

Strange are the means Providence uses to perform kindly miracles. Suddenly, the jack-

pines ceased to hinder the partners' progress. The trees opened up abruptly onto an area of snaggly, blackened stumps.

Whopper drew a deep breath as he stood in an open, boggy space with the open sky overhead and a wet, grassy meadow before him. On the far edge of the meadow a creek twisted through willows, and on a rise beyond was a log barn surrounded by a rail fence.

Hopping to saddle, Whopper bee-lined for the barn, with Swap at his heels and a cloud of mosquitoes in pursuit of both of them.

Swamp and Whopper whooped greetings as they reached the barnyard fence, but received no immediate response. Whopper called out again louder, for now he saw a house beyond the barn. It wasn't much of a house.

It was a dilapidated cabin with a loose shake roof and littered premises. But smoke curled from its chimney.

"Where there's smoke there's grub," blatted Swap.

"And usually a woodpile," added Whopper, who foresaw the possibility they might be invited to chop for their keep.

Their conversation produced a result their hails had not. The barn door squeaked open a few inches and something bearing a vague resemblance to a human face poked into view. The face, if such it was, could be honestly called the homeliest they ever had seen. The hair and beard were unkempt as cocoanut husk. The nose was like a cucumber, only it was red instead of green. The eyes were small and as expressionless as a bear's.

"H-howdy, friend!" Whopper greeted uncertainly.

The person behind the face thrust himself into full sight. He was an immense, bulgy monster in patched, dirty overalls that hung precariously by one twisted shoulder-strap. He scowled at his visitors, then sized up their horses and his scowl relented. The lower half of his hairy face gaped open in what may have been a smile of welcome, but it more closely resembled a calculating leer.

"For a second I hoped those was my stray hosses," he rumbled. "But they'll do just as good."

He abstained from elucidating further, thus proving himself a man of few words. Except in the line of profanity. For the voice was recognizable as that which had uttered the blistering oaths.

"Ready to start?" the man asked, wiping his big, hairy hands on his thighs.

"Start what?" Whopper asked stiffly.

"Start to work!"

Those were the doomful words, even more ominous than the thunderclap that accompanied them.

Whopper

CHAPTER II

The Muskrat Mayor

NOT only was Whopper Whaley a workless wanderer, but he was the glibbest liar west of the Rockies. Which gift, of course, accounted for his name. He had put his gift to good use on many occasions. It was only too plain he had urgent use of a smooth tongue now.

"We ain't job-hunters. We're coupla tourists. Tourin' on account of our health. Ain't we, Swap?"

"You bet!" Swap nodded vigorously, and in an undertone he added, "And this don't look like a healthy place for us!"

"Well, so long, mister!" warbled Whopper. "Reckon we better slope out o' here!"

"Don't call me 'mister', and don't start slopin' nowhere!" The man strode from the barn and flung his ponderous weight over the rail fence with an ease bespeaking both strength and agility. He grabbed the horses' bridles.

"The healthiest thing for you galoots to do is pile down and git busy!" he told them. "And while yuh're at it, call me Mayor."

"That the name yuh go by?" Swap asked, not caring much.

"All the name I got need for. Mayor o' Muskrat Meadow, I'm called."

"Listen, Mayor," yammered Whopper. "It'd be awful unhandy for you to have coupla invalids on yore hands!"

"You look plenty healthy to me," stated the other. "But you'll be invalids, all right, if you try to wiggle away from here!"

He emphasized the asserton by grabbing Whopper by one bony shank and giving a

powerful jerk. So unexpected and vigorous was the act, Whopper came unglued from saddle and went to the ground ungracefully. Whereupon the Mayor of Muskrat Meadow turned his fierce attention to Swap.

"Slide yore pants offen this taffy-tailed pony or I'll peel you like a green log!"

Swap slid and propped himself against the bay-sorrel. Whopper got up, brushed himself off and put his back against the rail fence. His attitude seemed cringing, and it was not difficult to understand why. For now it could be seen that the man's huge hands and bristly forearms were splashed and reddened with—fresh blood!

He had emerged gore-smeared from the barn. What gruesome secret was he hiding there? This out-of-the-way place was an ideal setting for murder. The monster of this swampland was certainly capable of any crime of violence. Had their arrival interrupted some foul deed? Even greater cause for worry was—would they share the same shocking fate?

WHOPPER steadied himself enough to get the slab of plug-cut from his hip pocket to his mouth. If ever he needed ideas, it was now. He chewed with nervous quickness to oil up his waiting wits.

"Here's how it is, Mayor!" he finally burst out. "We're on out way to report at the nearest draft board for our—our fizzical examinations!"

"If yuh're invalids, the Army don't want yuh," stated the bloody-handed man. "So yuh're drafted right here."

Whopper slumped and squatted and put his face in his hands.

"Feel like I got a spell comin' on," he murmured.

"Here's some medicine for it," said the Mayor of Muskrat Meadow.

Thunder boomed in the exact instant his sturdy right boot collided with Whopper in the region of the hip pocket. Without any effort on his own part, Whopper came to his feet.

Here was a dilemma there seemed to be less way out of than there was in the jackpine woods. Swap turned and plastered his rear against the bay-sorrel.

"What do we start in at?" he warbled.

"At a dollar a day."

"I mean, what sort o' work?"

"Like a light job to start in at?"

"Lighter the better!" Whopper said earnestly.

The Mayor fanned at a cloud of mosquitoes.

"It's like this," he told them. "I plum dote on wild strawberries, and they're numerous down along them willows. But I'm color-blind, and can't tell ripe from green ones. Savvy?"

His eyelids drooped leeringly as he said that. It was apparent he wanted to get them away from the barn and its guilty secret until he finished his grisly task.

"So git a bucket and go pick me a mess."

Berry-picking appealed immediately to the scared partners. It was a way to remove themselves from this menacing presence, and also offered an opportunity for a getaway. That hope went glimmering as the Muskrat Mayor swung their two horses into the barnyard.

"Well, there's one thing about it," said Swap, as he fingered cold sweat from his shiny brow. "Gettin' strawberries is a sign a meal is comin' up soon."

"Somehow," moaned Whopper, "my appetite ain't what it was."

He swung their lard bucket coffeepot at the persistent mosquitoes. Swap fingered his brow again, and discovered a splattering raindrop or two was mixed with the beaded sweat. The sky was dark and lowering.

"We better get the berries before it cuts loose and soaks us wetter'n frogs," he said.

AS SWAP and Whopper stooped to find the tiny tidbits in the boggy grass, mosquitoes rose in attack. Soon the luckless pair bore welts of strawberry size on their hands and faces. They cut willow fronds and swished with one hand as they picked with the other, and prayed silently for rain to furnish them with an excuse to quit.

They also let their anxious eyes rove the dark, crowding jackpines hemming in Muskrat Meadow. But no sign of road or trail was visible. Off in the woods, a grouse drummed on a hollow log. A leaping trout splashed in a pool. A light breeze swept the brooding wilderness, and a leaning tree gave a ghostlike groan as it rubbed an adjoining tree.

At each sound, a tremor passed through Whopper's stringy frame. The barn stood stark on the rise, giving no hint whatever of the shambles it sheltered.

"We might drop a few toadstools in these here strawberries," Swap suggested hopefully.

"Wouldn't do no good. That Mayor hombre could use coyote pizen for bakin' powder and thrive on it, he's so tough."

They were startled some more when a band of cattle broke from a willow clump and high-tailed into the timber. The sight brought melancholy memories to the partners of the days before the wanderlust had seized them.

"Ever wish we was hard-workin' cowpokes again?" Swap asked plaintively.

"Nope. A man needs practically a collitch education nowadays to practice the profession of cowboy. All sorts o' reports and re-

cords to keep up. Nowadays a puncher is only a beef bookkeeper. Got to get permission from Washington to pull a cow out of a mudhole."

"Wonder what else that murderin' Mayor's got lined up for us?"

"Might as well go back and find out. I'd as soon he slaughtered us, as have these skeeters do it. Anyhow, we got purty near a mess o' strawberries."

They slogged back to the barn. But the Mayor of Muskrat Meadow was nowhere to be seen. That was all right, because they could do without him in large, steady doses. Again the urge for wild flight seized them. But one look around the barnyard, and that hope quickly died.

Their horses were gone!

They legged over the rail fence and catfooted timidly to the barn door. They listened. Whopper steadied himself with a nip of plug-cut and laid hand on the latch. He swung the door back. He took one step to enter. His foot poised, and left him standing one-legged like some ungainly bird. For behind them sounded an angry shout:

"Reach, you two!"

They raised their hands, and whirled around. Five grim-faced riders, bristling with weapons, advanced from beyond the creek.

CHAPTER III

Rope and Rafter

REINING up at the gate, the moving spirit of this aggressive group covered them with a saddle-rifle. He handled the weapon like a pistol, one-handed, with the butt snuggled in the crook of his elbow. He had a chewed-off mustache and a badge on his shirt and was dressed different from the others, who were obviously cattlemen.

"Go in and see what they're up to, Hagerman," he said out of the side of his lipless mouth.

The one called Hagerman swung to the ground and dropped his reins. He was heavy-set and older than the rest, with a fancy cartridge belt and a long six-gun.

"You bet, Ranger! Bet we've ketched 'em red-handed!"

"Listen, f-friends!" wailed Whopper. "We only work here!"

"Yore work is over," Hagerman said harshly.

"That's somethin' to be thankful for!" muttered Swap.

The big Hagerman barged past them and flung the barn door open wide. The partners turned to join the fixed, open-mouthed attention Hagerman, the Ranger and the three rowdyish punchers directed toward the interior of the barn. Hanging by a rope from a rafter was a portion of still-warm beef carcass. It had been skinned out and its hide was flung over an empty stall. Hagerman turned the hide hair-side up.

"Sure-fire evidence," he cried savagely. "It's my brand, Ladder H!"

"Where's the hind quarters and loin, boss?" asked one of the trio behind the Ranger.

Hagerman gave Swap and Whopper a look, as though he expected to find the missing parts on them. Whopper regained something resembling poise under this gimlet-eyed examination. He felt confident he could prove his and Swap's innocence.

"The whole thing is like this, friends," he began. "Just before we got here—"

"Shut up!" crackled Hagerman. "All we want to hear from you is, where's the beef?"

"Looks like the Mayor took it!" blurted Swap.

"Who?"

"The Mayor o' Muskrat Meadow! Our boss!"

"Wonder if he means old Muskrat Mike?" spoke up the Ranger.

"That's it!" Hagerman declared vehemently. "That crawly trapper took it down to the highway and handed it over to one o' them black-market truckers!"

The partners exchanged looks.

"Then he's a beeflegger!" gusted Whopper.

"And he packed the meat out on our hosses!" added Swap.

Surely, they thought, that explanation would clear them. Instead, Hagerman pounced on their words.

"Your hawses, huh? Then you was in on the rustle!"

Whopper appealed to the Ranger.

"We never rustled nothin' in all our lives, and we can explain everything!"

"They all say that," Hagerman put in coldly. "Rustlers lie to their dying gasp."

"Well, seems to me that Muskrat Mike is the main culprit," the Ranger said.

"We'll handle him, all right enough!" Hagerman nodded. "But first, me and the boys will take care of certain details here on the spot."

As he spoke, Hagerman lowered what was left of the beef carcass, and took the rope which had held it up. He made loops at both ends, which still dangled across a rafter. He tossed the loops around the mosquito-bitten necks of Swap and Whopper.

The Ranger smiled.

"It's all right to scare 'em, Hagerman," he said, "but lynching has gone plumb out of fashion, y'know."

"Then I'm behind the times and glad of it!" rasped the irate cattleman. "How about it, boys?"

The trio whooped a chorus of assent.

THE Ranger looked thoughtful and chewed his mustache.

"It ain't legal," he objected mildly.

"It's justice, by hoky!" vowed Hagerman.

"Let's leave 'em dangle while we go after that other smelly polecat," yelped one of the Ladder H riders.

"Well, if you got to, go ahead," the Ranger said. "Only make a good job of it. Do it up right. Who savvies how to tie a hangman's knot?"

"Just whip the rope six times around and draw the end through," explained one of Hagerman's men. "Then cinch it tight under their left ears, boss."

"Okay, Ed. You come over here and help tie it right."

It was cold-blooded beyond understanding. Whopper opened his mouth, then closed it again with an overwhelming sense of futility. It was a strange thing. People believed some of his whoppingest lies. But here, as he uttered the solemn truth, they wouldn't listen.

Scared was hardly the condition of them both. They were paralyzed. Their lives didn't mean much to the world in general maybe, but they were precious to them. They caused no harm to anybody in their aimless style of living. Certainly, they made few demands on human society.

Ed seemed to be undecided about something. He hadn't dismounted.

"Mebbe it's only five times around instead o' six," he faltered. "I never tied a hangman's knot. I just seen it done."

Hagerman snorted.

"Then any ol' slip-knot'll do, specially for this slab-sided son of a Siwash!"

"Reckon I'll mosey on over to the cabin," said the Ranger.

Whopper summoned his voice, which for a while had failed him.

"Hold on, all o' you!" It came out in a stricken howl. "We never stole so much as a post hole and after all, dying men get a last request, don't they?"

Hagerman considered carefully.

"Sometimes," he decided.

"Then how's it for me to reach for a good-by chew?"

Hagerman jerked a nod.

"Watch 'em, boys," he ordered.

Whopper didn't go for the plug-cut in a hurry. He went through the pretense of searching all his pockets. After all, every lingering minute of life was precious. Moreover, as he explored his pockets, he was ransacking his mind as well for some desperate ruse. Words had failed. Nothing was left now but bold action.

As he dallied, the rain started. It came down with a rush that made Hagerman, experimenting with the hangman's knot, step back inside the open barn doorway. The Ranger had found shelter at the cabin. The three Ladder H punchers hunched their shoulders and began to grumble.

"Get it over with!" grunted one of them at Whopper. "If yuh ain't got a chaw, then skip it!"

Whopper had to act. In one hand hung the lard bucket with the wild strawberries. He turned slowly, facing the cattleman, intent on the rope. Whopper grasped the lard bucket in both hands, and winked a signal at Swap. Then with one swift motion he clamped the bucket down over Hagerman's head.

The berries squished juicily and there was a muffled yell. The partners leaped back into the barn, shoved Hagerman out and slammed the door.

They grabbed the rope and went up it like tin monkeys on a stick. They stopped at the rafters.

"Do we stop here, or go on up through the roof?" Swap wheezed.

Whatever answer Whopper had was chopped off by a shot, then a furious volley. Splinters whizzed as slugs lambasted the sides of the barn.

"If this keeps up," Swap shuddered, "these premises is goin' to be in bad shape before the Mayor gets back."

"So are we," gibbered Whopper.

The rain was pounding down now. The shooting stopped. Whopper peeked out through a crack. The Ladder H outfit had removed itself. Virtue had triumphed, temporarily at least. The two trembly "tourists" were still alive.

CHAPTER IV

Bigger Game

THE man who styled himself the "Mayor of Muskrat Meadow" was in a vile mood, as he returned to his isolated abode along a narrow, hidden trail. Riding the cheese-colored roan and leading the bay-sorrel, he cursed the abrupt shifts of wartime economy that had lifted him to prosperity, then dropped him again with a thud.

Stealing Ladder H beef had been easy, because he excused his presence back in the jackpine wilderness by trapping in the winter months. But he had just made the jolting discovery that black market beef was no

longer in demand. Sudden lifting of ration values had smashed the racket. So the "Mayor" was returning empty-pocketed, instead of jingling the cash he had expected.

Blindly, he blamed the two strangers, who had blundered onto his place, for his misfortune. And in a way his ire was rightly aimed, though the worse predicament that awaited him now had been brought about when the Ladder H riders had come onto Swap and Whopper's trail sign.

With the help of the Ranger, who packed a light ax, they had hewed their way along the partners' tracks and they had led them to the domicile of Muskrat Mike just in time to catch the pair.

Naturally, Muskrat Mike wasn't yet aware of these complications as he jounced despondently homeward. But as he neared the meadow, a blather of gunfire greeted him.

His thoughts leaped to that soogan roll of Whopper's in the barn loft. Had it contained guns? Were his unwilling helpers signalling for rescue? The trapper-beeflegger cursed his carelessness in neglecting to open and examine that soogan roll.

But he wasn't shying away from the disturbance. He wasn't afraid of Swap and Whopper, armed or otherwise. The Muskrat Mayor was a tough galoot. Once he had been attacked by a bear, the outcome of which encounter was a wrenched jaw and upset stomach—for the bear.

So he rib-thumped the cheese-colored roan into a hurryup.

He burst into the stump clearing just as the drenching rain was dampening the spirits of Hagerman and his men. But their spirits leaped as they sighted him.

Here was bigger game. Here, as one of them remarked, was their principal culprit. He even had the missing parts of the beef packed on his lead-horse, the bay-sorrel.

Without a shout or challenge, the range riders streaked toward their quarry. It did not seem possible he could escape, with the wall of timber behind him and four enemies attacking in fan-shaped formation.

But the miles Mike had covered running traplines had taught him how to penetrate the jackpine tangle with remarkable ease for one of his buffalo-like dimensions. So he leaped from the roan and crashed into cover afoot. There it was impossible for a rider to proceed fast enough to overtake him.

Hagerman, hot-headed and reckless, forged ahead of his men. He even left saddle, which was unusual for a cattleman. He heard Muskrat Mike on ahead and had his gun out, ready to shoot at first glimpse of him.

In this critical juncture, Muskrat Mike resorted to the wile of a hard-pressed cougar. He hid—and pounced on his pursuer from ambush.

The Ladder H boss was well put together, but he was no match for the mooselike malefactor. After a few wallops, Muskrat Mike had Hagerman under his arm. He found a good, soft spot and jabbed him down headfirst, like a fencepost. By the time Hagerman pawed his way out of a black, sticky bog, Muskrat Mike had vanished.

So had Hagerman's six-gun.

Circling widely, with all the silent subtlety of a freight locomotive, the fugitive again made toward the meadow and the barn.

"I'll learn that hen-necked, beetle-legged shikepoke a lesson!" he raved. "Him and that jittery jellybean!"

THE shikepoke and the jellybean, blissfully unaware of their new peril, saw their horses through a crack in the barn. The animals were crossing the stump bottoms and making for the shelter side of the barn. It seemed almost too good to be true. Their would-be lynchers had gone, and their horses had miraculously returned.

They loosened their possum-like holds on the rafters and dropped to the hay. Swap landed on a longish bundle. He gave a glad, muffled cry.

"Our soogans!"

"Mine, yuh mean," Whopper reminded him.

"All right, then you pack it," Swap retorted brightly.

They made their way outside and Whopper rigged his soogan roll into place behind his saddle, while Swap unloaded beef from the bay-sorrel. At that moment a human mudball lurched out of the jackpines and made for the creek.

Not until the mudball had hunkered down and sloshed the slimy ooze from his embarrassed countenance did they recognize him as their erstwhile executioner.

Blinking and pawing water from his eyes, Hagerman swooshed and mopped his face with his bandanna neckerchief as a preliminary to his next course of action. Some of his fierce energy had departed. At least, he was more open-minded than he had been. He was in a condition to listen because he was too cold and shivery to make any more vocal sound than "swoosh."

"Look! His gun is gone! His holster's empty, except for mud!" Swap whispered.

That bolstered Whopper.

"Then here's our chance to high-tail out o' here!" he hissed.

In a loud, firm tone he called out to Hagerman:

"Here's yore beef, friend, and let the matter drop. Be thankful yuh ain't got the blood of innercent men on yore hands."

Hagerman spit mud and recovered his power of speech.

"The quicker you git and the farther, the better," he shouted back. "I'm sick o' this entire mess."

This was astonishingly good news. Whopper felt almost ashamed of his advantage over the crestfallen cattleman.

"Yuh mean we—we're free to go?"

"I'm too danged cold to tie a hangman's knot or fool with a rope at all," shivered Hagerman, coming toward the barn. "Also, it's too muddy to bury you. An' I got troubles enough without you on my hands."

Whopper set foot in stirrup, to mount. But all at once his chesty confidence seeped out of him. He drew his foot down and turned again toward Hagerman.

"I've changed my mind," he chattered swiftly. "We—we're yore prisoners, friend!"

Swap took a look and saw what had brought about Whopper's quick shift of opinion. Skulking yonder at the edge of the jackpines, gripping a long six-gun as though estimating the range between him and the partners was the man they most feared.

"Yessir, it's yore job to hang onto us, mister!" Swap agreed frantically.

"Or even hang us, if necessary," added Whopper.

"What in—!"

Hagerman got no farther. Slogging toward them with a thundercloud scowl on his dripping brow was the Mayor of Muskrat Meadow.

"It's a bald-faced lie I told you about us bein' innercent," gabbled Whopper to Hagerman. "So we're surrenderin'."

CHAPTER V

The Alibi

HAGERMAN made a flying leap for the bay-sorrel, and made it. But Whopper twined himself around the rancher's right leg and Swap got a leech-like hold on the other. The rancher howled and tried to kick, but he was powerless. His legs creaked at the joints and seemed to lengthen about six inches.

The tug-of-war was interrupted by the arrival of Muskrat Mike, breathing heavily through his whiskbroom whiskers.

"Git down!" he ordered.

"Not much!" puffed Hagerman.

"All right, then git him off!" said Muskrat Mike, jabbing the six-gun in Whopper's ribs. "Heave up on him, you and that pizen little puffball! I need them hosses!"

They had to obey. Their captor led the bay-sorrel from under the cattleman, who by now was leg-jerked into a resemblance of his Ladder H brand. They lowered him to the ground and the beeflegging trapper brandished his captured weapon.

"I crave to hammer all o' you into the ground," he snarled, "like trap stakes! But I'm in a hurry, so I got time just for one!"

A throb of intuitive alarm told Whopper who that one was to be. He tried to sashay into the background. But Muskrat Mike stamped down on one of his feet and pinned it to the ground. Whopper was as helpless as a butterfly pinned in a display case. He made futile fluttering motions, as the huge man pressed the muzzle of the six-gun against his long nose.

It was a moment that called for quick thinking and decisive action. If there was any fate worse than being hanged, it was having one's nose shot off, particularly when one happened to be standing right behind it.

"H-how about them strawberries, M-mayor?" he managed to warble.

"What about 'em?"

Swap got the idea immediately.

"Wait, I'll get 'em," he gusted.

The lard bucket was in front of the barn door where Hagerman had shed it. Swap scuttled to it and back. It was up to him to work the trick this time. Hagerman saw what was coming and started talking rapidly to engage Muskrat Mike's attention. The six-gun muzzle slid down from the end of Whopper's proboscis. A breathless instant, then—

Clop!

The bucket came down. But Muskrat Mike, big all over, didn't fit! The lard bucket failed to slide down over his ears. It merely jarred his cranium and toppled off!

He emitted a roar of rage and whirled on Swap, giving tongue to outlandish oaths.

The rain had let up by now. And barely in time to glimpse this stirring scene and to take a part in it, the Ranger appeared from the far side of the ramshackle cabin.

"Drop it, and freeze!" he crackled.

MUSKRAT MIKE reversed the order of the command. He froze first, gaping at the totally unexpected fourth party. The Ranger gripped his short saddle-gun as he rode toward them.

And then Muskrat Mike dropped the six-gun and Hagerman bumped heads with Whopper as they both plunged for it.

The minor mishap was quickly overshadowed by what the Ranger was saying:

"I figured you was up to something worse than cattle rustling, Mike."

"Worse?" blatted Hagerman, removing his hat to rub the bump on his baldish dome.

"Well, worse for Mike," the Ranger went on triumphantly. "I poked around in his shack and what do you think I found there?"

Muskrat Mike was the shaky one now.

"Beaver," said the Ranger. "Illegal beaver furs. One thousand dollars fine and a year in jail for each pelt."

"H-how many did yuh find?" Whopper quavered.

"Must be a dozen or more."

"Then this—this big hombre, he'll get sent up for twelve years?"

"He will!"

Whopper reached for the reins of the cheese-colored roan.

"Fine!" he declared fervently. "That'll give us time to get a good long ways from here before they turn him loose! C'mon, Swap, let's—"

"Hold on," said the Ranger. "What's the rush?"

"M-mister Ladder H, here," Whopper indicated Hagerman, "he let on as how he aimed to let us go! Don't crave to hang us or anything, he says!"

A smile touched the Ranger's thin lips.

"Good thing he didn't. Because it also happens that I looked inside this soogan roll."

Then, for the first time, amid the assortment of gear that was draped on the Ranger's saddle, the partners saw a slicker-wrapped bundle and recognized it as the one Swap had lost back in the jackpine thicket.

"What'd yuh find in it? More Ladder H beef?" demanded Hagerman.

"No! But I found evidence that clears these saddle bums. A perfect alibi."

"A alibi? How come?"

"It's a cash slip from the store down at Chemult. Shows that only yesterday these leather loafers bought a supply of grub."

"And what does that prove?" demanded Hagerman.

"It proves we wouldn't be buyin' tin-can meat if we had fresh beef, rustled Ladder H beef!" yipped Swap.

"That's right," nodded the Ranger. "Also, why would they be south far as Chemult if they—?"

At that moment the three Ladder H punchers boiled out of the dense growth and came at a run to the group by the barn. The sight of the punchers was a sharp reminder to Hagerman of all the indignities he had suffered at the hands of Muskrat Mike. His men had kept themselves plenty scarce then. But now, when it was all over, they swarmed onto the scene like a pack of rabbit-chasing bird dogs.

With fire in his eye, Hagerman snorted and made a hasty resolve.

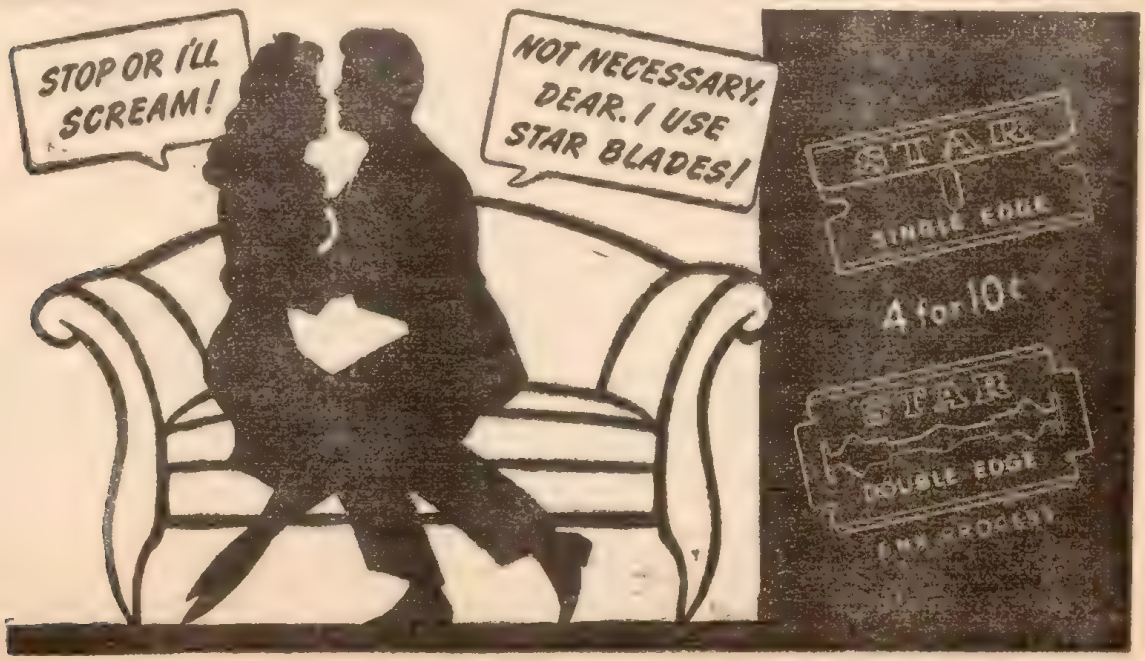
"You know what I'm going to do?" he gritted, addressing the Ranger. "Them three rannies ain't no good and never was! I'm going to fire 'em on the spot!"

"Fire the whole bunch? Then what?"

"And then," vowed Hagerman, "in order to express my regrets, I'm going to turn around and hire these two . . ."

That was as far as he got. Swap and Whopper hit saddle in the same split-second. The little partner snatched his soogan roll from the Ranger's saddle as he went. The two leather-loafing roamers stampeded straight for the seemingly impenetrable jackpines. Only this time, with the fear of steady employment driving them, they penetrated the tangle with the ease of soaped eels passing through a greased knothole.

And Muskrat Meadow was one of the numerous places that they firmly intended never to re-visit.



A Complete Novelet

LAST CALL FOR

Jeeter Price Wages a Grim Final Battle

CHAPTER I

Graveyard Invitation

JEETER PRICE was a blacksmith. He could shrink a wagon tire, shoe a horse, make a branding iron, repair a rough lock. But he didn't look the part. There was much else, too, his straight-featured young face did not reveal. For all anyone in the throngs that filled Bozeman's street knew, he might be any of the hundreds who were daily coming to this lusty, roaring new metropolis that had mushroomed along the Platte.

Jeeter's wary, deep-set eyes took in his first railroad boomtown, he heard its discordant noises, its wild bustle and raw, spitting life—and found nothing in it he could savor. But he had come here for a very definite purpose.

Wide of shoulder, strong-muscled in black cloth coat, he paced slowly along the new board walk, searching every face as his gray-eyed gaze met it. Those eyes passed quickly over two women, over a gray-haired, red-

"Stick close!" Ben shouted. "We're headin' for the hills!"

A LONE WOLF

By DAVID X. MANNERS

faced worker. They lingered on a face not unlike his own—a bit younger, leathery and brown, topped by a mop of unruly hair and set off by a stubborn jaw. But it was not the face he sought. Shrugging, he sighed and turned into a bar that bore the sign:

END OF STEEL

Inside, he planked down his money, called for a drink, and asked the man who served him a question.

"Ben Price?" repeated the sweating barkeep. "Never heard of him. Can't keep track of the new ones in this town, though. They say there's five thousand in the tent city alone." He hurried off with his wipe-rag to take another order.

Jeeter frowned in annoyance.

"Stranger here?" inquired a husky, big Irishman whose calloused fingers and tar-stained denims marked him as a tie-wrestler along the steel. "Shure, an' I am me ownself. Who's it you're lookin' for?"

"Ben Price," said Jeeter. "Or Clint Cleghorn. Ever hear of them?"

"It don't take acquaintanceship to have heard o' Cleghorn," boomed the Irishman.

for Gun Vengeance Against His Hated Enemies!

"That rapscallion will yet be the end of us all, what with his thievin' and killin' and plunderin'." He stopped suddenly and unhooked an elbow from the bar. "Say, what be you wantin' with *him*?"

"He's a killer, yuh say?"

"Aye, lad, he and every last divil in his crew!"

THE lines in Jeeter's face went lax. He nodded and turned away. Shoulders slumped, he pushed into the bright moiling street. So that was what "Ghost Dan" had meant when he had said Ben was working with Clint Cleghorn along the Platte. He'd meant Ben was "working" the country!

Jeeter tugged at his lower lip, and his mind flashed backward over the years. It had been gall and bitterness from the start—and now it looked no different for the future. No, life had never coddled him and his brother, Ben, even in those early years in saloon backhalls and gaudy honkytonks when Ghost Dan, their father, had been a tin-horn faro king and their mother was still alive.

They had each lone-wolfed it, after she had died, with Ghost Dan turning to the thankless, outcast life of a hired gunman. Memory was sharply etched in Jeeter's mind of his own first job, acting as tally agent for a cattleman. That he had been ignorant of the fact that the cattle were wet stock hadn't saved Jeeter from a five-year term.

It was behind gray walls that he had learned smithing. But it was not true, as some said, that the five thousand dollars he now had in his jeans came from turning in his own dad to the law.

Jeeter paused briefly in the shadow of a wooden awning. For months he had searched for his dad, who had been as hard to find as any man with a price on his neck. Jeeter had hoped that with his dad to help him he might put together the broken pieces of their lives. He had intended that for Ben, too. They could all go away somewhere, and he could set up a forge and anvil at a spot where trails crossed and the living would not be too hard.

He had found Ghost Dan coughing out the last of his life at a Mexican herder's shack, high in the Arizona hills. Ghost Dan had given him a money-belt, warm, from around his middle.

"Find Ben." he had said. "Mebbe what's in here will give yuh both the chance I never gave yuh. Gosh knows it's comin' to yuh"

Ghost Dan had given one last cough then, and Jeeter's pledging hand had come away damp and cold from his dad's lifeless fingers.

Jeeter crossed to the Bozeman House now, and went inside.

"You're lucky," the clerk at the desk told him. "We just happen to have a bed. It'll be ten dollars."

"A week?" Jeeter asked dubiously.

"A week?" The clerk laughed. "We been getting twenty a day. First-class accommodations are scarce in this town."

Jeeter found he shared his room with two other men. He washed up there and went again to the street. It was sunset, and muckers, section hands, burly wagoneers and pick-and-shovel men filled the town. Liquor to oil the tongue flowed copiously, but Jeeter soon found that mention of the name "Cleghorn" put the damper on ready gossip.

He felt his way, sparring for an opening. He was marking himself for trouble, he soon realized, by showing too much curiosity about something that apparently should be none of his affair. The shadowy pools at night, remote from the street's flaring gas lights, held hard-faced, sinister men who took care of such as him.

But the next day Jeeter found one such man and bought him a drink.

"You look like the kind that's been around," he said, and peeled out a sheaf of bills. "The kind that wouldn't be askin' too many questions about where his dinero come from."

"It's a gun job yuh want done?" The man's tone was accented.

"I've got no time to waste," Jeeter said. "Will yuh lead me to Cleghorn's hole-up?"

The sun-swart man jerked abruptly, then relaxed. A mocking smile twisted his mouth as his slit-eyes studied Jeeter.

"To go there is quick death—for them that ain't invited." he drawled. "Why yuh lookin' for him? Is it mebbe because yuh want to sell yore guns?"

"Yes," said Jeeter in desperation.

"Make yoreself a reputation," the man advised, "and Cleghorn will find yuh soon enough. He's always glad to get men whose gunarms are a little faster than other men's tempers."

Jeeter left the man in irritated annoyance. It was hopeless. He knew his brother Ben was about, that he would find him sooner or later. But he didn't want to waste months here, just keeping his breeches shiny.

HE SHOULDERED through the endless crowds, staring blackly. It was as always —everyone hurrying, bustling, going about his own affairs and looking out for himself.

Long ago, he had seen hope fading that somewhere there might be warmth and friendship for him. He had been almost resigned to loneliness and the bitter lone-hand struggle that life was, and now seeing the stampeding, brawling greed of this money-intent town, he felt the end of the little faith yet alive in him.

His resentment smoldering, he stopped and spread his legs, to watch the scene. So he was among the first to recognize the deadly set-up in the street.

It was a blond girl's slight, wavering figure that attracted him. He read the fear in her tensely angled hands as she held a market basket across one arm. He saw the desperation in the fixed stare of her blue eyes, in the arrested heaving of her chest.

She was standing by helplessly as a saturnine, dogged gunman whipsawed a gray-haired oldster into a fight that could have but one outcome.

"What I do is my own affair, yuh old biscuit-livered goat!" the rock-hard gunman was saying. He had blocked the way to a rig pulled up at the curb. "Or do I got to gun-whip that idea into yore skull?"

"Yuh'll steer clear of my daughter, and keep your dirty hands to yoreself if yuh know what's healthy!" the oldster came back.

"If that's the way yuh feel, then cut loose yore wolf! Dirty hands, eh? I'm not good enough for Bette, huh?"

Jeeter turned his back to the scene. He had no part in this quarrel. He knew the likely outcome if he took a hand. Others would be grabbing the gain, leaving him with the thankless end of it. He had seen it happen too often before not to know.

He looked at the bystanders crowding up—curious sensation-seekers, holding back only enough so that their own skins might not suffer when the fireworks blazed. He noted, too, among those closing in, the faces of gunmen. His eyes dropped briefly to their well-greased holsters, raised again to the bleak coldness of their expressions.

He turned back to the scene, a sudden idea brewing in his mind.

Tension had now reached the point of explosive release. The blocky gunman's hands were talons poised above six-gun butts. The oldster had brushed back the skirts of his town coat, so that his own weapons were clear.

But just as hands dropped to guns, two of the hard-cases raised a sudden uproar. It was meant to distract the oldster's attention, slow even more his already pitifully inadequate thrust. The gunman's .45 was out. It was going to be cold-blooded murder!

The roar of a .45 rocked the street. The oldster started back, as if shaken by the impact. But it was not the gunslinger's weapon that had fired. The oldster was not hit.

His own smoking Colts in his hand, Jeeter watched the surprise and dismay on the gunslinger's face as he clutched a wrist that spurted blood.

"Next time," said Jeeter, "yuh might do better at straight back-shooting."

Quickly, after the fellow withdrew, seeking the comfort of his own kind, the crowd broke up.

The girl's pale, strained face lifted to Jeeter Price's. The oldster was slightly shaken, but unharmed.

"That was Chris Jackman, my father, whose life you just saved. I'm Bette Jackman." The girl extended her slim white hand to him. "I don't know how to thank you."

Jeeter ignored her hand. "Don't thank me, miss. That's not why I done it." He stared into the moistness of her blue eyes. "But next time, see that yuh don't get yore dad in a spot where he'll have to match gun-speed with somebody out of his class."

Jeeter felt her bewildered gaze upon his back as he turned and clumped up the street. He followed along the line of saloons and supply houses, keeping close to the building walls. Then, just as he had hoped, and planned, a man stepped out of a recessed doorway and stopped him.

"Clint Cleghorn would like to see yuh," the man said. "Interested?"

"Where?" drawled Jeeter.

"He'll be in town this afternoon. Step inside this doorway. I'll give yuh the details."

CHAPTER II

A Pair of Hang-ropes

JEETER PRICE went back to his hotel. Cleghorn's lieutenant would be around later in the day. He would meet him then. Jeeter had his plan in mind. He would throw in with Cleghorn only long enough to find young Ben and wean him away, then he and Ben would ride down to some tree-bordered Arizona range where the water was sweet and the prospects bright for an easy, peaceful life.

At the hotel, Jeeter changed his shirt and had his dinner. He felt better. Things seemed at last to be shaping up. He was in a pleasanter mood than he had known in a long time when, after the heat of the noon hours began to wane, he sauntered along the street.

The sound of building, of hammers and the rasp of saws was loud on the air. Bozemantown was going places. From the mines money was pouring in, in a full-flowing stream, and now the railroad was pushing through. Permanent and substantial buildings would replace the town's ugly canvas-sided shacks as soon as the busy citizens found the time. Already the town boasted of a theatre and a handsome bank building.

Jeeter idly turned his steps toward the bank. Freighters and high-staked draught

wagons lumbered up the middle of the thoroughfare. Buckboards and horses crowded the racks along the curb. Jeeter watched the milling street curiously. There his attention was abruptly drawn by a figure that stood among the crowded knot of horses at the hitch-rail at the side of the bank.

Tensely, Jeeter moved closer. The man he had seen was a youngster. A shock of thick, curly hair crowded out from under a flat-crowned plantation hat. His body was wiry lean and his face was rock hewn out of the hill-trails.

"Ben!" Jeeter blurted.

That stubborn jaw was unmistakable! The years had changed young Ben Price little!

Jeeter pushed toward him.

"Ben!" he shouted. "You young son-of-a-gun! You—"

Jeeter broke off. Ben had a gun in his fist! Jeeter slowed. He saw Ben's hair-spring tautness. Ben was holding the bridle reins of half a dozen horses at ready. Then Jeeter saw the wide open door of the bank, the masked men backing out of the place!

The cry of "Cleghorn!" was swallowed in a blast of guns. The street was abruptly cleared, washed clean as sand. Masked men were scattering in all directions from the bank. One plumped down on the boardwalk as lead caught him. Another armed man sprawled down the steps of the bank, bright red bubbling from his mouth. Still another staggered toward the horses.

Lead raked at Jeeter. He grabbed for his Colts.

He was hemmed in with Ben and the wounded outlaw, he suddenly realized.

"Jeet!" he heard Ben shout. "Good glory!"

Townsmen were shooting at Jeeter, at Ben, and at the wounded outlaw weaving up into saddle.

"Catch one, and ride, Jeet!" he heard Ben scream. "They'll cut yuh down!"

There was no choice. There was no dickering with a withering barrage of leaden death, no explaining.

Jeeter's foot touched stirrup on the closest horse. He was away, then, warm blood cascading down his side. A bullet gouged his forearm.

Ben tore ahead, bent low over his mount's neck. The wounded outlaw was inert in the saddle as pursuit roared up. Rifle bullets toppled him like a meal bag.

Jeeter closed in behind Ben.

"Stick close!" The kid's face was drawn and white. "We're headin' for the hills!"

Jeeter pounded after him. He felt the mighty reserve strength of his horse. It had a heart like the hills. It tore down barrancas and leveled killing slants with its stride. Pursuit gradually faded, was divided.

The kid finally dismounted in a sheltered copse. He was breathing hard from the excitement.

"We made it!" Color was returning to his thin face. "That cursed Cleghorn ran out on us, when he should have stuck and fought. He was lookin' out for his own skunky hide!"

Jeeter grimaced. "Did yuh expect different?"

"We're safe now, anyway," said Ben. "But I was shore scared stiff back there for a while that they were goin' to get yuh, Jeet. I'd have never forgive myself if they had."

Jeeter warmed at his words. "Would it have meant a blamed lot to yuh?"

THE kid's jaw jutted and his eyes glinted. "Hittin' it around like I've been doin', a gent finds out that they ain't many people that matter much. Kinfolks is few enough. They should stick close. What ever set us apart, Jeet?"

"That's life, kid."

"Then let's make it different from now on. I'm sick of the Hole, and runnin' from the law. Let's go off, the two of us, somewhere far."

"Not too far!" rang out a thick voice.

Armed men lunged through the willow thickets.

"Grab for the clouds!"

"A trap!" gasped Ben. "They flanked us!"

"Take it easy!" the leader rapped a command. "Don't make no sudden moves."

Half a dozen men closed in. Apparently they had left their horses behind to "Injun up" on foot. They were townsmen. One wore a deputy sheriff's badge.

"Shuck them gun-belts from around yore middles, usin' just one hand on that buckle," the lawman ordered.

Helplessly, Jeeter and Ben complied. Then with surprise and pleasure, Jeeter noted Chris Jackman among the possemen. He had saved Jackman's life that morning. Jackman would help him now!

"What'll we do, Shafer?" a posseman asked the deputy. "Pack 'em back to town?"

"While the rest of them make it clean away into the hills?" The deputy shook a broad and pompously mustached face. "They killed Natie Kline, the bank clerk, didn't they? I'm for hangin' 'em on the spot an' goin' after the rest of their pack."

There was a quick murmur of assent.

Jeeter looked to Ben. Ben's eyes were stricken. Muscles twitched along his thin, hard jaw. Jeeter looked to Chris Jackman.

"Sorry, stranger." The oldster shook his head and dropped his shoulders helplessly.

Jeeter realized how wrong he had been in expecting hope there. It was just the dirty turn-about he might have expected. This was the thanks and repayment you got for saving a man's life! Jeeter's gorge rose.

"Why, you—"

Jackman's face was cold. "Yuh shore didn't lose much time gettin' busy on your own."

One of the men got ropes from the horses. Another helped fashion a pair of nooses. And Jeeter knew that for him to protest he'd had no part in the robbery, would be an utter waste of breath.

Jeeter watched the rope ends being thrown over a low tree limb. His own and Ben's hands were tied behind them.

A posseman grabbed Jeeter with unnecessary roughness. Struggling futilely, Jeeter was hoisted up into the saddle of the horse he had quit only a few moments before. Ben was thrust up on the saddle of a second horse. The ropes were adjusted about their necks.

Jeeter looked above at the blue sky. It was darkening, and the evening birds were calling their songs in the shadowy thickets. This was the end. For this he had endured five years of prison. He looked to Ben. The kid was a grim, bloodless ghost.

"Thirty seconds to say yore prayers, boys!" boomed the pompous lawman.

Jeeter closed his eyes, clamped his jaws. He had wanted to curse Chris Jackman with his last breath. But instead he whispered instead a bitter prayer of thanks that this was the end of a world in which no man could trust another or look to another as a true friend.

A switch swished. Jeeter's horse jumped ahead. Jeeter braced uselessly. There was a quick snap, and then a terrific jerk. Jeeter swung off into space. Bright lights exploded in his brain. The last thing he knew was something like the sound of distant cannonading. Then he was falling, falling, falling . . .

JEETER was bewildered when consciousness trickled back. He touched the rasped soreness of his neck, massaged the cramped tendons. Then his eyes glimpsed the figure swinging lifelessly above him. An oath caught in his teeth. He pulled away the broken hang-noose from about his own neck.

Not satisfied with just hanging them, those possemen must have fired a departing volley of shots at their dangling bodies. A slug must have clipped the rope that held him!

Quickly, Jeeter staggered up. It was still light. He might have been blacked out for only a matter of seconds. Then he stopped. The way Ben's head lolled told him more plainly than words that the youngster's neck had been broken, that he was beyond help.

Brush suddenly crashed. The possemen were returning! Jeeter lurched to the cover of scrub oaks. The men's curses were loud on the air. They thrashed through the thickets, scouring the flat. Twice Jeeter cowered behind a smooth slab-rock as horsemen skirted his covert.

"Curse yuh, Jackman!" he heard Shafer, the deputy growl. "That was the blamedest fool stunt I ever see. They was cold meat without yore pot-shottin' 'em!"

It was getting dark. The orange-streaked glow of sunset was fading from the western heavens.

"Forget it, Shafer," came Jackman's retort. "That shorthorn we lost was registered at the hotel. If I don't miss my guess we can get a line on him there—who he is, and mebbe if we're lucky, even a picture of him. He won't get far with dodgers plastered out for him. Le's go."

Jeeter gritted his teeth. So Jackman himself was responsible for that blood-hungry trick of shooting back! The man whose tail-feathers he had saved only that morning!

Jeeter stared blankly into the dark. He had come to Bozeman a free man, looking for his brother. Now his brother was dead, and it was the dark trails for him. Reward posters would haunt his trail. Threat of bounty-hunters would menace him at every turn. He had better make fast tracks.

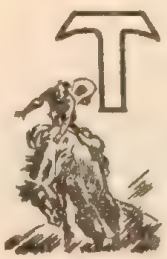
Jeeter's hand unconsciously slipped toward the moneybelt strapped about his middle. It was lucky he had that stake. It would be plenty bad getting by without it.

Then he made a grab for the belt. Frantically he looked about. Then he remembered the brief tussle with the posseman when the man had been hoisting him up in the saddle for the hanging. The man's hand could have slipped beneath his shirt then.

The money was gone!

CHAPTER III

Secret Shipment



THE twisted trails carried Jeeter Price to the Line and across it into Sonora. He gave up the idea of working at odd jobs on lonely, wasteland ranches, and staked himself a claim where a tiny stream bed cut the Ojo hills.

Flakes and dust glinted in the wash of his gold pan. Long hours of patient labor in the hot sun that burned him brown as any native, filled his pokes. But Jeeter hated the life.

Two things kept him in Old Mexico. First, he knew he must win himself another stake. Second, he knew that the ink was yet too fresh on the reward posters that bore his name for him to take a chance. When the time was right, and money was heavy in his levis, then he could satisfy his yearning for

his home land, and risk the perils of returning to the peace and comfort of life on a range he might call his own.

Three years passed. Then came the decree, enforced by the Federalistas, that no Yankee might pan or take gold from the country without authorization. That, Jeeter knew, was the same as prohibiting it. So one dark night found him running the gauntlet of Rurales' rifle fire to hop the Border. His saddlebags were full . . .

The railroad was at Trinidad, Colorado. Word came to Jeeter that it was pushing through the Raton Pass toward Las Vegas and Santa Fe. The Santa Fe trail would be alive with freighters and shippers as never before. There would be plenty of work to keep the anvil ringing and forge fires blowing hot.

Jeeter found a road ranch, and made his proposition to the wizened owner, Bill Whitman.

For a share in the profits, Whitman was only too happy to have Jeeter set up shop in an old shed on the place. Having a smithy around would attract many a customer for meals and a bed as well.

"This may look like a quiet spot," the road ranch proprietor apologized with a twinkle in his eye. "but that's just because she's playin' possum for now."

"I think I'll find it busy enough once I get started," Jeeter assured him. "After all, this is the main trail through to Las Vegas. Everybody's got to use it.

"That ain't what I mean," Whitman said, stroking his straggly gray mustache. "What with the railroad boys set on comin' through here, and with the stage line gun guards with war in their necks to keep 'em out, 'cause it'll mean their ruin, it's been Satan-in-the-saddle around these parts."

"I don't hanker to take it up for any of 'em." Jeeter said. "All I want is to be left alone."

Jeeter avoided everyone with whom he had no dealings, and attended strictly to the task of setting up his shop. Often he felt the stubbled growth of his chin, studied the lines that lonely years were grooving deeper into his face that still retained its youthful cast, and wondered if his past were altogether buried.

The old bitterness was yet in him. It would always be. Frustration and disillusionment became part of a man after too many years of disappointment. But there was one thing that could ease the aching hurt he felt over loss of Ben. Vengeance could pay him for that.

Jeeter quickly found he could not keep altogether free of the quarrels and hates now besetting this new range to which he had come. On his second day at Whitman's, a crew of hard-faced riders dismounted before the hitch-rail of his shop.

"Vic Handley's bullet-throwers!" Old Bill Whitman choked, and scurried from sight so fast. Jeeter did not know what became of him.

Puzzled, he turned to greet the four men who were advancing toward him, spurs jingling.

"New here, ain't yuh?" said the biggest among them, a bull-necked man. "Well, we can drop a lot of work yore way, if yuh'll play along with us and steer clear of Zack Farrel's bunch. Take a look at the right fore shoe of my hoss."

Bill Whitman wormed his way back as soon as the riders had gone.

"That was Vic Handley hisself, yuh was gabbin' with," he chattered. "Don't mess with him."

"Who is Zack Farrel?" Jeeter wanted to know.

"Zack Farrel? Why, Zack's gun boss for Chris Jackman and the railroad bunch. A swell crew. The stage lines ought to know they're licked. Their ruckus raisin' will never stop the railroad. Jackman—"

JEETER'S harsh-lined face went bleak. "Chris Jackman," he said. "A little wren of a gent, with whiskers?"

"Yeah. Solid gold, that one is. Jackman's too old a fox at layin' tracks through hostile country to back down before a two-bit crowd like Farrel's."

Jeeter turned away. Why, this was just as it had been before! Jackman had been with the construction crew up in Bozeman. Now the railroad was down here, and he was still with them.

Memory cracked back with the sting of a black-snake whip. Jeeter thought of the last sight he'd had of Jackman—beneath the hangtree. It didn't concern him now that Jackman might remember him and turn him back to the law if they should meet. It was inevitable that they should meet. But, double-crosser that he was, Jackman would never live long enough to inform on him.

Jeeter learned from Whitman that Chris Jackman had taken up temporary residence in a large mill-finished house in town. That night Jeeter cleaned and oiled his Colts and strapped his gun-belt about his middle. He closed his shop and headed for the distant, blinking lights of Las Vegas.

He found the Jackman house, night-shrouded and set back behind protecting blue spruce. He left his mount behind, and approached the house, circling wide to its rear. He crossed the yard, and at a crouch eased up to a lighted window.

The late moon had not yet risen. Aside from the flickering beacon from that one

window, the place showed no sign of life. Slowly, Jeeter raised his eyes above the sill.

The soft tread of a step was his first warning. Like the crash of a pole-ax something exploded against his head. Desperately he clutched for a hold on the bare wall of the house. Like the bursting of a million stars inside his head, a blow landed again . . .

Dizzily, Jeeter came to. It was daylight. He knew he must have been out a long time. A blob of pink and white seemed to be floating like a balloon above his head. Then his blurred vision focused and the blob took shape. It was a girl's face.

"You'll be all right now," said the girl's sweet voice. "Just lie still and rest."

Jeeter rubbed his eyes. He was lying in a bed in a strange room. Now he could see the girl's face distinctly. She was blue-eyed and pretty. Jeeter's breath caught with the realization. The girl was Bette Jackman!

"We're so sorry—Dad and I." Her face was sober with tensely felt sincerity. "It's all been a terrible mistake. Dad's life has been threatened, so we've been forced to employ guards. One of them struck you, not knowing who you were."

Recollection of edging up on the window of the house for a look at Chris Jackman came back to Jeeter.

"I see," he said.

But he didn't see. He didn't understand this at all. What was their game in taking care of him this way?

The girl came back several times during the day. She brought broth and saw to his comfort. She was lovely, Jeeter had to acknowledge. Her hair was golden, and her figure was lithe and young. He studied her as she explained the difficulties that harassed her father in putting through the steel rails that would mean the end of the stage-coach lines. She mentioned nothing of the past.

Chris Jackman came in later in the day. He had aged greatly since Jeeter had seen him last. Jeeter expected him to ask what he had been doing beneath the window where the guard had found him, but apparently the oldster took it for granted that it was all a mistake that wasn't worth going into further.

"I haven't forgotten what happened up there in Bozeman," Jackman finally said, and he spoke in a low, easy tone. "It's tormented me time and again since, that I wasn't able to have prevented what that posse did. I wondered what became of you. I'm glad fate has brought us together again. Mebbe now I can repay yuh."

Yes, thought Jeeter. Repay. That was exactly what Jackman was going to do. But not in the way he thought. Fine words from Jackman! Why, he hadn't raised a finger or said a word to stop the posse!

Jeeter played it slow. There were better ways to even a score than by meting out quick death.

Days passing found Jeeter improved. He was up and about, but still the Jackmans would not hear of his leaving their care. Bette brought him choice steaks from the market. She attended to the dressing of his scalp wound. It would have been easy for him to understand why men fell in love with their nurses—had his been anyone but Bette Jackman. Could it be that the Jackmans were holding him on in this way, while they checked with the authorities at Bozeman?

TWO days later, Jeeter left the Jackman place, confused and a little doubtful. But back once more in the blacksmith shop, things came clear again. From the bureau drawer in his little room behind the shop, he took a picture of Ghost Dan Price—and one of young Ben.

He had been attracted by Bette's beauty and grace, as any man would have. But that was all superficial. He knew the real truth of the situation when he looked at the picture of Ben's young face.

How he would strike back best at Chris Jackman for Ben's death, Jeeter did not know. But opportunity would likely come sooner, he decided, if he enjoyed a tacit friendship with the shriveled-up little railroad man.

Business at the shop grew brisker as the main line of steel pushed ever closer. The roadbed was reported already over the pass, and advancing south. Once it passed through Dawson, a town that stood at the forking of the two routes to Santa Fe, all the hopes of the Las Vegas stage coach lines would be shattered. For by terrorism, it had been their intention to cause the railroad to revise their route and make for Santa Fe via Taos and Alcalde, instead of through Las Vegas. Their final thrust, Jeeter knew, would be coming shortly.

One bright day, at the sound of hoof-clatter in front of his shop, Jeeter went outside, to find Bette Jackman sitting her Morgan saddler. She greeted him with a "Hello" and a cheery laugh.

"The railroad's giving a Victory Ball at Raton," she said, "to celebrate coming through the Pass without mishap. That's over eight thousand feet high, you know. Muckers, and graders and engineers—just everyone—will be there. You're going to take me!"

"And yore dad?"

"Dad will be there, of course." She looked about her to see if anyone were in earshot. Then, reassured, she whispered, "He's been a little worried lately. He's been bringing in the railroad payrolls mostly in the ca-

boose. He's missed paying off the last three weeks because of all the trouble the stage-coach people have been causing. But since Dad thought it would help the men's spirits to pay off before the ball, he sent orders to the bank at Denver to ship the cash through over the regular trail—instead of on the railroad. The shipment will look like something else, of course, but it will all be Dad's responsibility, and if something should go wrong—well, a month's payroll will be gone!"

Jeeter stepped closer to her. "The trees have ears." He pitched his voice low. "Your dad shouldn't ever have told yuh!"

"Dad tells me everything." Her figure was trim in dark blue riding clothes. "I guess everybody's got to have someone to confide in. It makes it so much easier to bear when you can share the burden of secrets and troubles."

Jeeter nodded thoughtfully. "I'll be plumb happy to take yuh to the ball," he said, "but I wish yuh hadn't told me about the shipment." He studied her young, open face. "Did yuh tell me because yuh want me to know yuh trust me, or is it—"

"I don't know why I told you!" she burst out. "Don't ask me! It's just that I'm worried and—oh, darn it all! I'll be glad when Thursday night's come and gone, and that crazy lumber wagon shipment is safely here!"

She jerked her reins and rode away.

Jeeter watched after her, wondering curiously. How strange it was that a man like Chris Jackman had a daughter like her.

He went inside to his bedroom and strapped on his gun-belt. He hardly glanced at the pictures of Ben and Ghost Dan on the bureau top.

Outside, he saddled his horse and headed for a certain small spread he had heard the tall grass whisper was back in the hills. At its line fence he was stopped by a guard. He spoke briefly with him, and then was accompanied by another rider to a dilapidated ranchhouse. On the ranchhouse veranda, he was questioned again by another man whose face was hard and brutal and whose guns were thonged low at his thighs. Then he was admitted inside.

Vic Handley, head of the Las Vegas stage-coach crew, confronted him.

"Say, ain't you the smith from down at old Whitman's road ranch?" the bull-necked man boomed.

Jeeter's lips were tight set. He ignored the question.

"Yuh'll like to stop the railroad from comin' through this way wouldn't yuh?" he countered.

Handley looked surprised. "It looks like they're done set to ruin our business."

"I've got information about a payroll shipment they're makin'. Snaggin' it will do more to break 'em than any ten other tricks yuh could think of."

Handley's eyes narrowed. "What's yore price?"

"I've got no price," Jeeter said coolly. "I'll tell yuh see, I happen to hate the railroad, too!"

CHAPTER IV

Lone Wolf's Last Stand

FOR the next two days, Jeeter kept to the seclusion of his mules, shrank wagon tires, repaired a broken plow a farmer brought in. He worked furiously, desperately, as if his tasks demanded urgent haste.

If a job were a two-hour one, he finished it in an hour. He scarcely stopped for breath. The sweat rolled down his face. His chest and bulge-muscled arms blackened with the smoke of the forge fires.

Now he was free to know peace, he told himself. For with Chris Jackman taken care of, Ben could at last rest easily in his lonesome grave. The blood of Jeeter's brother would have been avenged.

Vengeance was sweet, they said. Jeeter considered that. The sweetness, he guessed, would come later—to drive away the vast restlessness and disquiet he felt over having informed on the payroll shipment.

This was Wednesday. Today Bette would be riding out to see him. Never skipping more than a day, she always found some excuse to drop around at the shop. Maybe after tomorrow, Jeeter thought, she would realize—as he had realized long ago—that friendship never paid.

To avoid her, he closed his shop at noon. He saddled his horse and rode into the hills, to find the comfort of solitude. He must ever be the lone wolf, he knew now. Association with others always brought grief, no matter what the relationship was, or how one handled it.

He rode high into the hills, where the Ratons lifted their tree-shrouded summits and rocky fortresses. The air blew cooler against his cheek. Once, he cut the sign of horsemen on the trail. He turned away from it, then caught sight of the riders themselves on a high, overlook point.

Like vultures they were gazing down upon some scene unfolded in the valley beneath them. He counted a dozen riders, and from their looks and the heavy artillery they carried they were Vic Handley's men.

Jeeter circled wide, and came upon the

same scene himself. He wondered, curiously, why he hadn't ever before been out to where the railroad was building through. Not until now did he realize the tremendous scope of the work and the inconceivably great problems that must beset an undertaking like it.

Here in the hills it was not just a problem of laying ties on a roadbed and spiking down the rails. Cuts had been made through the tumbling slopes. Hundreds of pick-and-shovel men had to bore like ants into the rocky valley sides, cutting a right-of-way where not the faintest semblance of trail had ever existed.

Everywhere surveyors and engineers were at work, sighting through instruments, driving stakes, laying lines. Teams of mules with shovels and scrapers graded and filled. Huge, high-sided wagons carried away blasted rock. Engines puffed along already completed track, bringing up materials and supplies from the hinterland.

In one section were dozens of temporary pine shacks. In another, half a hundred men were clearing a flat of a stand of gangling pines. Sawmills. A hospital. Mess tents. It was a world in itself.

Jeeter moved down toward it, cutting beneath the half completed framework of a hundred-foot bridge spanning a gorge. He could not quash the respect and admiration that welled in him. This job was vast and mighty. These men were bridging a continent with steel.

Banishing obstacles and hazards, they were welding together a nation.

Cities and homes would rise in the wake of their passing. This was the drama of a new world being born—a young people fashioning it to their needs. Every mile won was an advance in a battle. But it was more than that. These people were builders. They were building America. It was a crusade.

Jeeter moved through the pageantry of it, staring in wonder. Then he stopped in a suddenly arrested stance as a familiar figure came out of one of the small shacks, blueprints in hand.

With every passing day Chris Jackman looked grayer and more stooped. He had plainly taken the weight of this whole undertaking upon his shoulders. He had been building a railroad up at Bozeman. He was still building it here. One of these days he would be getting a little too old. Maybe he would find out even before then what thanks and rewards an appreciative world would dish out to him for his labors.

IT WAS dusk when Jeeter came back to his shop.

"A girl was here to see you," old Bill Whitman said. "I was surprised yuh'd closed up. It was the same girl who's been here before, so I let her in."

Jeeter went into his cabin. The mussed bed had been made. The floor had been swept and scrubbed. He raised his eyes. Curtains were on the windows. Flowers were set in little pots on the ledge.

He walked through the cabin. Bette had been there. A grimace twitched his lips, bunched the muscles along his hard jaw. Tomorrow night Bette would know his thanks to her. Tomorrow old Chris Jackman would get his reward.

He went to bed that night, fell into a fitful sleep. When he awoke in the morning he was bleary-eyed. In a nightmare he had relived that scene beneath the hangtree. He had seen Ben kicking out his life at the end of a rope, while Chris Jackman emptied his gun at him. Again he had heard Jackman's words, "His things are at the hotel. We'll find out who he is, and get a picture of him. We'll plaster the West with dodgers that carry his name."

That was what had sent Jeeter Price to Mexico. That, for three years, had made him shun the company of man.

Jeeter's hands turned clammy. Tonight the payroll would be coming through the pass on a wagon disguised as a lumber freighter. Vic Handley's men would be waiting—like hawks, like beaked buzzards circling above carrion. They would flap and crow as they tore that shipment to pieces.

More than a thousand men working on the railroad—almost two thousand. Three weeks' back pay. That would be more than a hundred thousand dollars!

Jeeter watched the sun rise high, then begin its downward arc toward the west. The brightness of the day faded.

He went into his room, staring blankly at the curtains, the flowers on the window ledge. He found a sheet of paper and pen and ink. What he wanted to write was simple and direct. But it was torture before he got it down.

He gave the note and a half dollar to a Mexican kid he found near Bill Whitman's lunch stand, told him where to deliver it. Then he went back inside his cabin and packed his cantle-roll.

Dusk was upon him as he rode off, slipping quietly away.

He topped a knoll, and a horse coming up fast from behind stopped him. He turned, saw the sweat-streaked mount, the girl on it.

Bette Jackman's blond hair was disheveled and her eyes were wide.

"Jeeter!" Her hand fluttered out to him. "You're not going!"

"Yuh still on talkin' terms with me?"

"Jeeter, it's been our fault. We took it for granted that you knew!"

"He's sent men to guard the shipment, to see the coach boys don't grab it?"

"Dad's gone himself to see to that. But, Jeeter—you must understand. You can't believe the horrible things you said about Dad!"

Jeeter's lip curled. "I reckon it was somebody else who tried to pot-shoot me and Ben when we was already hangin'."

"No. But it wasn't you he was shooting at. Dad's a fine marksman. He was bewildered by what had happened, but he was sure you were innocent. He intentionally shot apart your hang rope. He meant to free you, don't you see?"

A likely story! Jeeter's pain spoke.

"Ben died."

"But dad didn't know that other fellow was your brother, or he'd have tried the same for him. You *must* understand!"

She turned her horse up alongside his. Her hands clutched his shoulders.

"You've been lonely, and embittered—and now you love me, and you're afraid to face it!" She tossed the tumbling blond hair from her cheeks. "That's why you couldn't go through with what you'd planned against Dad, isn't it? Tell me, Jeeter! That is the truth!"

Jeeter shook his head. "My kind never does anything to help anybody. My father was a killer, my brother an outlaw. So am I. I'm wanted right now, back in Bozeman."

"But you're not an outlaw!" Her voice threaded with desperation, pleading. "And you're not wanted. Dad told me back there in Bozeman, before he rode out with the posse, that they were after you, so I sneaked into your hotel and got your things—everything that could identify you."

Jeeter took away her hands that held him.

"You did that?"

"I took your belongings away before the posse could find out who you were. You're not wanted anywhere."

CHRIS JACKMAN had really saved his life from the hangman's posse then. And Jackman's bold declaration to the posse about going back to the hotel to learn their escaped prisoner's identity must have only been a front to cover his having already sent Bette there.

But then a harsh laugh peeled from Jeeter's lips. His jaw jutted. Was he going to believe this girl—and get double-crossed again?

She saw the harsh determination, the disbelief in his glinting eyes. She clutched at his shirt as he spun his horse about.

"It's the truth!"

"Thanks." He whirled away, breaking free of her grasp. "So long!"

He spurred into a furious pace. He roweled his horse desperately, trying to expunge from his mind the memory of the pain in Bette's eyes.

He stopped as he topped a far crest.

Far off, he heard the first faint crackling of guns. He looked toward Las Vegas, its lights flickering on now in the evening haze. Up there on the slopes Chris Jackman and his men were fighting a battle for their lives. Vic Handley's bunch was carrying the war to them, to stop the steel rails from going through!

Jeeter raked the flank of his horse, swung it about. The miles fled beneath him.

He reached for his gun. Something was tangled on it. He brought free a gold chain, a large, heart-shaped locket dangling from it. Jeeter's lips formed the initials "B. J."

Bette must have looped this over his gun back there! Back there when she'd tried to keep him from leaving!

From the slopes on opposite sides of the trail streaks of gun-fire darted like exploding sparks. Jeeter quartered in. His first shot toppled an outlaw. By coming in at a flanking angle, he could enfilade the enemy positions, rake them with fire.

Jeeter's shots brought down another, and another. But he, too, was in the open!

A hail of lead swept him from saddle. He whipped a kerchief about a gouged arm, lunged on.

Chris Jackman was leading a charge now on the disorganized raider position. But Vic Handley himself was holding ground. He was drawing a bead on the wizened railroader. And at that moment Jeeter saw a black-bearded outlaw drawing bead on himself!

Jeeter made an instant decision. Once before he'd saved Jackman's life but Jackman had repaid by seeing him hanged.

The gun in Jeeter's hand blasted. But not at the bearded outlaw. Handley straightened up. Ignoring the black-bearded man, Jeeter squeezed trigger a second time at Handley.

The bearded outlaw's bullet smashed into Jeeter like a fist below his heart. He gasped, stumbled, went down. Blood spread in a widening blot on his chest as he lay unconscious on the ground . . .

Faces hovered over him when he came to. He made out Chris Jackman then, and Bette. It was all quiet. The battle must be over.

He felt Jackman's hand grip his. He heard Bette's sob of relief.

"The outlaw pack?" he muttered.

"Scattered to the winds. Finished. Vic Handley's dead." The old railroader's tight lips quivered. "And it was you who done it—saved my life!"

Suddenly remembering the bearded outlaw, Jeeter touched his chest. But it was only a flesh wound there.

Bette handed him a lump of twisted, torn

metal. He took it. It dangled from a chain.

"The locket?"

She nodded. "I knew you'd be coming here. I gave it to you, for luck."

He looked at the bullet stuck in the heart-shaped token like a peg in a ragged hole. He looked up at her glittering blue eyes. He owed her his life then!

She shook her head, seeming to read his thought. "I looped it over your holster. It was you who put it in the pocket over your heart."

"I wanted it there," he blurted. "It's the way I feel—about you!"

FROM a distance Jeeter could hear Jackman's men herding the prisoners they had taken, tending their wounded.

Jeeter turned the locket in his fingers. It came open as he tugged curiously at the leaden pellet. Inside were the ragged remnants of pictures.

Jeeter choked. "These are pictures I left behind me when I ran from Bozeman. Left behind me at the hotel!"

Ghost Dan Price, as a young man! And a picture of his own mother, as a girl!

Bette's lips were near his cheek. "I had to make you believe we had tried to save you back there in Bozeman. I slipped that picture-locket where you'd find it, when I thought you wouldn't believe me any other way. But you did believe me, Jeeter you did!"

Old Chris and Bette helped him up. Together they looked toward the flickering lights of Las Vegas. His happiness was here now, Jeeter knew. He had found it. His failing had been that he hadn't realized there were a lot of things a man had to fight—and fight hard for—if he wanted them. Like love and friendship.

"It's good to fight beside a pair like you," he murmured. "It's good to fight beside those yuh love!"

And with Bette's arm stanchly in his, he knew he had an infinitely precious reward for all the perils that might be his in battling ahead with Chris—in the railroad's conquest of the West!

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

FOLKS, try tuh answer these five questions about the West. Three out of five correct answers is a good average. If yuh can't rope 'em, look at our answers on Page 76—but try to answer them your ownself without looking. Okay, let's go! And let us know how yuh made out.

1. Were there horses on this continent when the Spanish first came here?
2. In what town is the West's most famous "Boot Hill" graveyard?
3. Who was the first president of the Texas Republic?
4. Where is the lowest region in the West below sea level?
5. What is the real name of the Hopi Indians?

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign
Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

The men found themselves looking into the bores of two steadily held six-guns

ROWBOAT FEUD

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

Land grabbers get away with plenty on rancher Jim Nesbitt—for a while—but he has the last laugh!

THE buffalo bunch-grass was withering to the roots that year, and even the sage dotting the draws and ravines of the badlands offered no protection to the vegetation which grew in its shadows. Cattle stood with heads drooping, looking from red, alkali-rimmed eyes into the distance in search of water. The drought was on in earnest around the town of Esmer.

A short, squat man in scarred chaps single-footed his roan up to the hitch-post in front of Sheriff Grabe Henshaw's office. He dismounted quickly, went with stiff-legged stride through the door.

"Sheriff," he announced. "I want to report the theft of a rowboat."

Having spoken, he looked at the other men who sat in the hot office. There were four of them—bonanza wheat farmers who had seen their spring crops dry up before the wheat had attained full head, men who had been lured from the East by the promise

of wheat fortunes, men who didn't know the prairies and who expected that their crop failures of this year would not be repeated next year. Slowly these men had drifted in, had usurped the range around Esmer, and cattle had had to wander farther and farther afield in search of unplowed ground and grass.

When the short, squat man mentioned the rowboat, all four men began to grin.

Henshaw, who favored the bonanza farmers over the cattlemen, chewed thoughtfully on his quid, his small, shrewd eyes twinkling.

"Well," he drawled, "that don't seem like a thing for a man to steal, do it, boys?"

"Somebody stole it," repeated the rowboat's owner grimly. "I aim to find out who. I reckon the same man who stole my rowboat has been playin' hob with my steers, and burned down my barn, tryin' to run me off my range. I'm reportin' the theft to you, Sheriff, an' I expect yuh to do somethin' about it, if you haven't sold out lock, stock and barrel to the thief!"

Henshaw's face turned florid.

"See here, Jim Nesbitt!" he roared, leaping to his feet, his hand falling to the butt of his .44. "You take back that insult!"

"I'll take it back when yuh bring my rowboat back," said the blocky man coldly. He turned and left the office.

HE HAD just swung into the cracked leather saddle of his roan when Cord Pearson, an oldster whose range lay next to his, sauntered across from the general store. He laid one hand on the roan's hot flanks, looking up at Nesbitt.

"What's up, Jim?" he drawled. "Yuh makin' palaver with Grabe about yore rowboat?"

Nesbitt's eyes widened. "How'd yuh know that?"

Pearson's grin grew slowly. "The story's been breezin' all over town, Jim. Grabe knows who stole yore rowboat, all right, and so do all the citizens. Supposin' yuh make tracks down to the General Land Office. I reckon Jed Hale there can give yuh more'n a hint if he cares to." He winked, looking at the younger man's six-guns. "And mebbe if he don't care to. If yuh need any help later on, I reckon I still got a steady gun-hand."

"What could a rowboat have to do with the Land Office?" asked Jim Nesbitt.

"I guess yuh'll find out," said Pearson unhappily.

A few moments later a determined, grim-lipped man pushed open the door to the Land Office, and Jed Hale looked up from his desk. He clattered to his feet behind his desk. He grinned weakly as he greeted Nesbitt.

"Jed," said Nesbitt, "I had a rowboat stole from the dry gully back of my ranchhouse. What do you know about it?"

"A rowboat?" Jed Hale's fat-creased face began to shake with laughter. "What for would anybody want to steal a rowboat in dry weather like this?"

"That's what yuh're goin' to tell me, Jed! I got reliable information somebody's pullin' a land-stealin', with me on the butt end!"

When Jed Hale still hesitated, Nesbitt centered his six-shooter on the land agent.

"Bring out yore current file of land releases!" he commanded.

"Don't have to get hasty," Hale said aggrievedly. "I'm just actin' in line of duty, Jim."

From his files he drew a sheaf of Government land grant papers. Nesbitt took them, holstering his guns while he ruffled through them. His agate-blue eyes darkened. Seventeen land grants had been made out this morning. One was in the name of "Whip" Quinstone, a rancher neighbor of Nesbitt's. The other sixteen had been made out to Whip's cowhands.

Jim Nesbitt looked up. "You knew these papers would give my whole southwest pasture to Whip Quinstone, yuh buzzard! His waddies'll transfer their quarter sections over to him to make it 'legal'!"

Worriedly, Jed Hale kept looking toward the door. "That never was yore land," he whined. "Yuh never took out a proper claim on it accordin' to the new homestead laws. Most of you cattlemen think yuh own the whole Montana Territory!"

"Shut up! I suppose Whip and his waddies got a right to it legal?"

"They have now, Jim. This mornin' Whip and sixteen of his boys come into the Land Office and said they wanted to take out homestead papers. 'Yuh'll each have to produce witnesses to prove that the land you want to homestead is irrigated and can be cultivated, accordin' to the Desert Land Law,' I told 'em."

"They couldn't prove anything like that!" Nesbitt burst out.

"That's where yuh're wrong, Jim," Jed Hale said firmly. "They produced proof all right, and I don't mind sayin' this is where yore rowboat comes in. It ain't my fault Whip stole yore rowboat, is it, Jim?"

"Go on. Don't let me hear none of yore lyin' law talk."

"Well," said Jed, rubbing his hands craftily, "they's a gully which snakes all through the southwest pasture of this range yuh claim is yore's, Jim. Usin' the other men as witnesses, each man proved that they seen a rowboat movin' through that gully. With such proof that the land was irrigated, I was bound to draw up the homestead papers."

Hale looked into Nesbitt's darkening eyes

with the bland expression of one who knows himself to be within his rights. Nesbitt pressed against the solid oak desk.

"I ought to drill yuh, yuh varmint!" he snapped as Hale backed up. "Yuh been lettin' the ranchers hereabout get away with plenty. Yuh wink one eye and use the other to draw up yore defraudin' papers. You know as well as I do there ain't enough water in my southwest pasture to float a cockroach, much less a rowboat."

"But they swore to it," Hale snapped, a hurt expression on his jowled face. "They swore on their oath they seen a rowboat movin' through that ditch!"

"They're liars!" Jim Nesbitt was fuming. He smashed his fist on the desk. "An' I'm goin' to prove in the presence of witnesses that they're liars! I'll bring the proof here, too, and see that yuh cancel them ownership papers!"

JED HALE nervously waited until the door slammed shut behind Jim Nesbitt. Then quickly he grabbed his sombrero and sneaked out the back door of the Land Office.

In the street, Jim Nesbitt found Cord Pearson. Nesbitt jerked his head almost imperceptibly, and Pearson leisurely walked back to the hotel hitching-post for his horse. A few miles outside of town he caught up with Jim Nesbitt who related the episode in the Land Office.

"That Jed Hale is a skunk," Pearson drawled. "He's colludin' with any land-grabber that can tell a lie and is willin' to part with a gold piece or two. He worked hand-in-hand with Whip Quinstone on that land steal. Now I don't mind a few homesteaders clutterin' up my land, so long as they play square and decent. But when these bonanza farmers take over good cattle pasture, turnin' the sod wrong side up, like the Injun says, they're lettin' us cattlemen and theirselves both in for a heap of trouble."

Jim Nesbitt nodded grimly. "Only thing is, Whip ain't figgerin' on doin' any bonanza farming. When there's water on my range at all, it all comes in through my southwest pasture when the mountain snows thaw. The lobo has cornered my water supply, like he's been tryin' to do ever since he moved into the valley."

"What yuh aimin' to do now?" Pearson demanded. "Ain't nobody in the county that don't know there ain't any water in yore southwest pasture, but that ain't proof yuh can bring before a Federal judge. And Sheriff Henshaw sides with Whip."

"I've got all the proof I'm goin' to need," declared Nesbitt. "I'm goin' to get my rowboat back and shove it under Jed Hale's nose in the presence of witnesses. I've got the only rowboat in the county. Built it for my button, expectin' some spring floods from the mountains. The spring floods never came, which accounts for why that rowboat will give me back my land!"

After two hours the riders rounded the shoulder of Wolfer's Hill, then rode through gathering darkness along the cut-back that led to Jim Nesbitt's spread. He hardly paused to speak to his young wife and son, except to promise the button he would have his rowboat back by morning. He roped a wiry pack-horse from the corral, and he and Cord Pearson went off cross-country again.

As they approached the southwest pasture, Pearson loosened his .45 in its holster, his grizzled face catching the moonlight and reflecting it in a soft, fuzzy halo. The drying grass underfoot made rattling sounds as their horses' hoofs brushed against it.

They found the deep gully which ripped across the pasture as if a giant had dug a knife into the fertile ground, making a long, zigzag pattern. They rode along the rim of the gully, keeping an eye out for the rowboat.

"Dry," remarked Cord Pearson disgustedly. "Ain't been no water in this gully for a year."

Jim Nesbitt grinned. Then suddenly he reined in his horse with a soft cry, dropped from saddle, and pulled the horse's head down.

"Riders!" he whispered. "Patrollin' up yonder!"

Pearson was beside him in a second, peering. They saw two slow-moving figures, forking their mounts, drawing on cigarettes.

"Quinstone's men," snarled Nesbitt. "Here to keep trespassers off. Yuh figger Jed Hale's tipped Whip off?"

Pearson frowned worriedly. He inched his gun out.

"Likely, Jim. Or mebbe Whip hopes yuh'll show up and try to outsmart him. Might be Whip's men are standin' guard over the rowboat—unless they burned it up."

Nesbitt drew a hard breath. Burning the boat would be the logical means of getting rid of the damaging evidence it would be against Whip's homestead claims.

"If he hasn't burned it," Nesbitt said grimly, "mebbe he's usin' it to decoy me, hopin' he can bushwhack me and get the rest of my range. We're trespassers now, Cord, and mebby he'd be killin' us legal."

Pearson was hunkered down, and the brittle grass rattled as he stirred uneasily.

"Yeah, I guess," he said. "We'd better double back and get a couple of yore waddies, Jim. See them cottonwoods yonder?" His short, thick arm pointed to the bunched trees a couple hundred yards away. "Unless I'm mistaken, Whip and a passel of his

men are hid in there. The minute them two riders see us they'll signal, and the rest of the rannies'll come hightailin' for us."

"By the time I can get any of my boys," Nesbitt objected, "it'll be light, and Whip might decide the game ain't worth the candle, and send the boat up in flames. We got to do what's got to be done now. Take 'em by surprise. Bag and gag 'em without a sound. Come on."

THEY backtrailed their horses behind a rise, dropped their reins. They got the pack-horse into the gully, fastening him to a projecting limestone spur by his halter. Then they started walking forward, crouched cautiously, but the sounds made by their high-heeled, hob-nailed boots as they scratched the ground raspingly, seemed magnified to thunder in the gully. But when they reached the angular wash-out in the gully they hadn't attracted any attention.

They inched along a few more feet, then lay against the sloping bank of the gully, their six-guns out, pointed toward the two riders silhouetted faintly against a silver sky. They waited patiently until the riders turned their horses, began coming their way again, slowly.

Jim Nesbitt strained his eyes up the gully. "There it is!" he whispered.

Cord Pearson followed his glance, and nodded. Sure enough, the rowboat, its pointed pinoak stem turned toward them, was listing on its port side on the floor of the gully. Leather traces were still attached to its forward oarlocks. It was apparent to both watchers now how men had seen that rowboat "moving through the gully!"

"It shore is funny," Pearson soliloquized, "what lengths some men will go to to tell an honest lie!"

They turned their attention back to the approaching riders. When the figures loomed over them, Nesbitt deliberately made a scuffling sound that might have been the scurry to cover of some small night animal. The two riders stopped warily, peering down into the gully.

They found themselves looking into the bores of two steadily held six-guns. Their mouths fell slowly open.

"Yuh guessed right, gents," Jim Nesbitt said bitingly. "These are real guns, and they throw real slugs! Get down from yore hosses!"

The men looked for a second as if they would touch spurs and make a break for it. Nesbitt steadied his gun.

"I mean it! Get down with yore hands up!"

They dismounted, fear and anger showing in their shadowed faces.

"Come down into the gully with us!" ordered Nesbitt.

They slid down. Pearson deftly disarmed them, commanded them to turn around. Before they knew what was up, he brought the butt of his gun against one gunslick's head. The other let loose a cry that was muffled as Nesbitt leaped on him, silencing him. In a moment the two lay on the ground, limp, unconscious.

"They'll keep for a while," Nesbitt whispered tensely. "Let's get at the boat. Can't waste no time."

The two stooped over the rowboat, the older man at the stern, Nesbitt handling the more difficult prow. With the boat keel-up, they staggered down the gully, the chipping, heat-blistered paint of the boat chafing their skin. When they reached the pack-horse they laid the boat lengthwise with thwart-pieces up, and cinched it tight with pigging ropes. Nesbitt grabbed the trailing reins and after a few moments found a cave-in which provided easy access from the gully.

"We'll take the Whitewater trail through the pass," he whispered exultantly.

"Better hurry, though." Pearson's voice was grim. "Whip Quinstone is real quick goin' to get wind that somethin' ain't what it should be. Won't be long before they see them riderless hosses wanderin' around. Then they'll be after us. And we'll have to go slow with this here crazy rowboat joggin' around on the cayuse's back,"

Nesbitt started off, taking the lead, the pack-horse's lead-rope tied to the pommel of his saddle. They did have to go more slowly than he had thought. It took them an hour before the first hump of the hills shut them off from the prairies, and another two hours before they hit the trail that led through the canyon.

Then the going became rougher until they hit higher ground, the famed Whitewater Trail over which the stage-coach rolled twice a day. They rode on, and Jim Nesbitt breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the faint gleam of the lights of Esmer showing through the mistless air scarcely five miles distant.

"We ain't out of trouble yet," Cord Pearson said worriedly, as they sloped down toward the rough canyon trail again.

And hardly had they headed toward the mouth of the canyon and the prairie road than there came the crack of a carbine!

SOMETHING tugged at the sleeve of Jim Nesbitt's shirt with invisible fingers. He turned, yelling with fury. He dropped from his horse just as the carbine cracked again, and Cord Pearson was beside him.

"Ambush!" Pearson whipped out.

Nesbitt flicked out his gun, let go a burst of gunfire. Suddenly, the pack-horse went high on his hind legs, screamed as a carbine

cracked again. The pack-horse fell with a sodden thump, and the rowboat burst its pigging strings, rolled into a dry wash. The pack-horse twitched and Nesbitt and Pearson scuttled behind the carcass.

The ambushers were spread out in a semi-circle just beyond a fringe of sumac that laced the canyon wall. Jim Nesbitt loaded again, blazed away, hoping to flush them from cover. The dead horse gave them better protection than the sumac did Whip Quinstone's men.

One man made himself visible, inching back in startlement from a close shot. Nesbitt pumped a bullet at him, thought he saw him fall. Then he hunched down again.

Suddenly, in the lull of firing, Nesbitt heard Whip Quinstone's voice.

"Better give yoreselves up," Whip snarled. "We'll get yuh sooner or later, Jim. And nobody'll know who done it! Matter of fact, the quicker yuh die, the sooner I'll buy the rest of yore holdin's. Get up and walk away and leave the rowboat there and we'll forget the whole thing!"

Jim Nesbitt laughed. "That's my answer, Whip!" he called. "I'd sooner go to purgatory than give up and let you win. This is a fight to the finish!"

With the last word he turned to Cord Pearson.

"Cussed if we're goin' to lay here and let these lobos do us in, Cord," he gritted tensely. "There can't be more'n a half-dozen of 'em. Part of Whip's crew would have taken the trail back to my spread, thinkin' we'd moved in that direction. The rest would gamble on the Whitewater Trail. It was plain bad luck for us they happened to come across us so near to Esmer. Think yuh can give 'em the idea that both of us is behind this dead cayuse?"

"Shore," Pearson drawled. "With two guns, I can."

Jim Nesbitt snaked his way into the dry wash where the rowboat lay, and up the other side toward the precipitous canyon wall. He lay still until Pearson began working both his guns, in uneven rhythms.

Under cover of that racket, and the answering bursts, he went slipping and sliding and clawing up the canyon face until he reached the mesa. He dropped flat and his eyes gleamed as he saw below him five men, flat on their stomachs.

Whip Quinstone was working the lever on a carbine. Plainly visible in the moon's rays, the other men were firing six-shooters.

Jim Nesbitt grinned tightly, dropped down the side of the canyon until he came to a granite outcropping that would afford him firm footing. He was directly over the heads of the bushwhackers, scarcely thirty feet. It would be like shooting fish down a well.

He waited for a lull in the gunfire, then called down harshly:

"Up with 'em, gents! Yuh're covered!"

Below, there was a wild scuttling. One man rolled over, and centered his weapon on Nesbitt, but Nesbitt beat him to it as he let loose a savage burst. The man thrashed on the ground, holding at his crimsoned shoulder.

Whip Quinstone was on his feet, sighting along the carbine. He never fired. Cord Pearson yelled, pumped a bullet Whip's way. The carbine arced from Whip's grip.

"Drop yore irons!" Nesbitt yelled. "Pronto!"

Slowly, with disgust on their bearded faces, the other men dropped their weapons. Whip looked stupidly at his empty hands, then upward at Jim Nesbitt with hate.

Cord Pearson came running up, forcing the men into a bunch, and Nesbitt slid down to the canyon floor with satisfaction.

"We're takin' you buzzards to town," he told Whip savagely. "Cord, get these other bushwhackers on their hosses, and let 'em lead the way—peaceable! Let this hombre with the busted shoulder lay here and take care of hisself till we can send help. Whip—" he grinned at the raw rage on the older man's florid face—"yuh're goin' to ride too. But not hossback. . . ."

IT WAS three o'clock in the morning when the cowtown of Esmer was awakened by the unholiest racket it had ever heard. Two men were whooping it up with gunfire and raised voices. In addition, there was a scraping, bucking, bumping sound as if something were being dragged at full speed along the hard-packed alkali street. The citizens of Esmer began piling out of their beds, getting half-dressed and running toward the commotion.

"Everybody out!" a voice roared. "The streets is flooded. They's a river runnin' straight through town! We got the proof!"

That was Cord Pearson, grinning from ear to ear as he alternately fired his Peacemaker over the heads of the four discomfited riders at the head of the procession, and yelled.

Bound hand and foot to the center thwart of the rowboat sat Whip Quinstone. Leather traces were drawn through the forward oarlocks of the rowboat. These traces were double-hitched to the saddle-horns of the two horses which were towing the rowboat down the street.

As the boat rocketed down the street, stirring up a choking wake of hot dust, Whip Quinstone swore steadily and loudly. Townsfolk already on the street laughed and shouted for the rest to turn out.

When Jim Nesbitt brought his parade to a stop opposite the rooming house where Jed

Hale stayed, there was a laughing, roaring crowd surrounding the rowboat, plainly enjoying Whip Quinstone's predicament.

Sheriff Grabe Henshaw broke through the press then. He stopped stock-still when he saw Whip.

"Wha-what's the meanin' of this?" he choked, as if unable to believe what he saw.

"I'll tell yuh the meanin' of it," Whip snarled, jerking with all the strength of his massive shoulders at his bonds. "These skunks ambushed my men, shot a couple of 'em, then done this outrage to me. Get me out of this, Grabe!"

Henshaw moved forward hastily, but several men stepped between him and the rowboat.

"No yuh don't, Grabe," one big man growled, his square face hostile. "This is Jim Nesbitt's show. He's had a mite of dirty work done to him, so let him do things his own way."

Grabe Henshaw reddened, but stood still when the rest of the townspeople agreed with the spokesman. Jim Nesbitt exchanged a glance of satisfaction with Cord Pearson.

"Jed Hale, come on out here, pronto!" Pearson yelled.

It didn't seem likely that Hale was coming out. Several men went in and dragged him onto the street by the seat of his pants. Hale cringed, ringed in by a grinning crowd.

"Now," Jim Nesbitt snapped, leaning forward on his saddle-horn, "we'll see what kind of proof it was that Whip had to show that that land was irrigated, Jed. Because if it is, then Esmer's main street is a roaring stream of water. Yuh're all my witnesses to that. Yuh've seen a rowboat movin' down Esmer's main street!"

Men cheered, and made catcalling sounds at Whip. In these days of inefficient land legislation, nobody cared much if a minor law was broken in order to get some much needed acreage from the Government. But when it came to out and out land-stealing, land that controlled a vitally necessary water source, they were all for the underdog who could do a thing like this to prove himself wronged.

"Whip's proof," Nesbitt continued acidly, "was that his own men saw a rowboat movin' through a gully in my southwest pasture. Jed figgered there must be water in the gully, so the land was irrigated accordin' to the terms of the Desert Land Law. Of course, a bribe helped some, but if that gully is runnin' with water, then this street is too. Because that's the way Whip got a rowboat movin' through it—by havin' hosses tow it along the dry gully bed!"

"Yuh can't prove that!" Jed Hale whined, looking worriedly at the laughing crowd. "I'm actin' accordin' to the letter of the law. Far as I'm concerned, there was water in that gully when the witnesses seen this rowboat movin' through it, and you can't prove there wasn't!" His voice rose triumphantly.

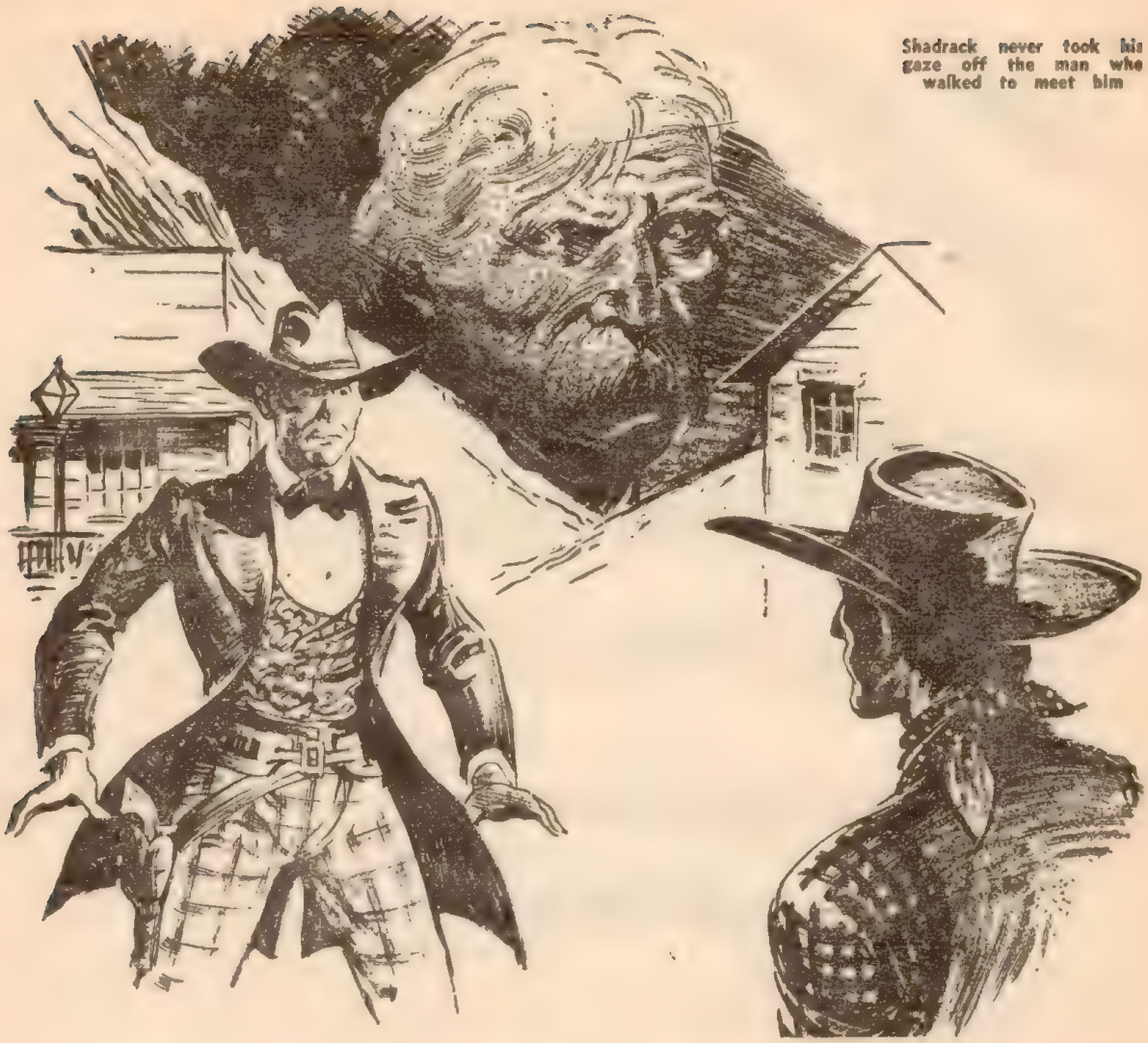
SEVERAL men looked frowningly at Jim Nesbitt.

"Gentlemen," Nesbitt said softly, "I'm callin' on anybody that cares to take a look at this rowboat to act as my witnesses. Spring and summer this rowboat has been layin' out in the sun and not a drop of water has touched its ribs. So it's warped from stem to stern and there's bigger and better holes in its bottom than in a prairie gopher's settlement. Gentlemen, even if there was water in that there gully, this rowboat wouldn't have floated!"

Several men stooped over the rowboat, then straightened almost immediately, grinning. Whip Quinstone began to swear again, but he sat in an attitude of complete, disgusted defeat. He saw that the townspeople had rendered the only possible verdict, and that Jed Hale would have to abide by it.

Cord Pearson inched his paint-horse close to Nesbitt.

"Reckon yuh won't have any more trouble with Whip," he drawled. "The minute we tied him in the rowboat he knew the game was up. Look at him. His foot is stuck in one of them holes!"



Shadrack never took his gaze off the man who walked to meet him

BOOT HILL BACKFIRE

By GUNNISON STEELE

Old storekeeper Limpy Horne turns matchmaker when small town justice demands a six-gun showdown between gunman and rancher!

THERE was a strut and a swagger to Al Shadrack's slender, flashily dressed figure as he left the Desert Lady Saloon and went along Signal's main street. The smirking half-smile on his thin dark features bespoke arrogant confidence in the final result of the approaching gunfight he had planned.

After a quick glance both ways along the windy street, Shadrack turned into old "Limpy" Horne's general merchandise store.

Limpy was alone in the place, puttering with a saddle. He was a wiry, gnarled little gent whose squinty gray eyes held deep, quiet wisdom. He sold just about everything here in his store—groceries, hardware, drygoods, saddles and guns, and just plain doo-dads for the kids. Limpy commanded a lot of respect in Signal, even from a tinhorn gunman like Al Shadrack.

For Limpy had not always been a storekeeper. There were plenty men who remembered him as one of the deadliest gunmen west of the Missouri, with half a dozen tamed

wolf towns along his backtrail. That was before an uphill gun-battle, resulting in a busted gun arm and a crooked leg, had forced him to more peaceful pursuits. Now his chief interests were his store, and his pretty blond daughter, Martha.

Limpy minded his own business, talking little. But when he did talk, folks usually listened. These things Al Shadrack knew, and yet he couldn't keep the contempt from his half-smile as he looked at the puttering oldster.

As Shadrack entered, Limpy peered blandly at him over his spectacles.

"Howdy, Al. Somethin'?"

"A box of forty-five shells," Shadrack said.

Limpy hobbled round behind a pine counter. "Seems like I sold you some forty-fives a little while ago, didn't I?"

"Yup. But next time I pull trigger, I want to be shore somethin' happens. And that'll be right soon now."

The old storekeeper took a box of cartridges from a shelf and tossed them on the counter. Picking up the money Shadrack offered, Limpy went back to his puttering.

SHADRACK emptied the cartridges from his fancy pearl-handled .45. He broke open the new box, started thumbing in the new shells, feeling faint annoyance at Limpy's apparent disinterest. Whereas most men despised him, and didn't bother to conceal the fact, he was not sure about Limpy. The oldster accorded him the quiet courtesy he offered everybody, his attitude not changing even when he, Shadrack, had started shining up to saucy Martha Horne.

"Seen Jeff Barnes lately?" Shadrack asked casually.

"Two days ago."

"Martha at home?"

"Reckon she is."

"I hope she stays there today. Lead's liable to fly here before sundown."

"So you and young Jeff aim to have it out?" Limpy murmured.

"If Jeff ain't plumb yellow. I sent him word I' meet him in the street any time before sundown. If he don't show up, he's through on this range. He can fight, or run."

"Don't reckon Jeff'd have much chance against yore draw. He's just a cowman, and he ain't killed three men, like you."

Shadrack shrugged. "That's his hard luck. Some men don't learn to stay in their own class till it's too late."

"Le's see, now," Limpy said thoughtfully. "Trouble's about this fist-whupppin' young Jeff give yuh out there in the street a week ago, ain't it? Don't just remember what started the fight, though."

"Jeff Barnes claimed I'd been braggin' about how I aimed to marry yore daughter, Martha," Shadrack said brashly.

"Yeah, that's it. Jeff's been goin' steady with my gal nearly a year, yuh know. I heard talk they aimed to get married after fall roundup."

"That was before Martha started takin' moonlight rides with me," Shadrack said, grinning. "So that's what the trouble's really about—the fist fight just brought it to a head. How do you feel about it, Limpy?"

"The fight? Why, I dunno."

"About who marries yore daughter—me or Jeff Barnes."

Old Limpy was quiet for a moment, his head lowered over the saddle.

"Martha's eighteen," he murmured then. "I figger she's a right to choose her own man. But this is a hard land, and it's a hard, cruel life, tryin' to make a two-bit cow outfit pay. I've seen it kill women, and men too. There're easier ways of makin' a livin'. Still Martha'll have to make up her own mind."

"I'll make it up for her!" Shadrack laughed, holstering his loaded gun.

He had suspected that Limpy Horne shared the town's bad opinion of him, but now he saw he had been wrong. He was a gunman—Limpy had once been a gunman—so there was a bond between them.

"Yuh won't have to worry about havin' Jeff Barnes for a son-in-law," he said. "Well, so long."

Limpy turned suddenly, as if making up his mind. "Al," he asked abruptly, "when yuh meet a man for a shoot-out, what do yuh watch—his hand, or his eyes?"

"Why, his hand, I suppose."

"Most men do. And that's a mistake. That's why a lot of men get killed."

Shadrack turned back interestedly. "How so?"

"Watch a man's hand, and yuh see him start the draw. Watch his eyes, and yuh'll know a second before he aims to draw. A funny shine comes into 'em, and his eyelids kind of pinch together."

"I didn't know that," Shadrack admitted. "It gives a man the advantage, don't it?"

"Yeah. Somethin' else. Ain't one time in ten but what a man, after he's shot down, could lift his gun and get in a shot or two hisself—if he tried hard enough. Most men, especially if they're up against a man they know is faster, are purty bad scared. So when they get knocked down, they quit, just naturally lay there and die. But if a man ain't scared, if he hates yuh bad enough, if he really *wants* to kill yuh, lots of times he can do it even after he's mortal shot. Yuh got to remember such things."

"I'll remember." Al Shadrack licked lips that were suddenly dry. "Well, so long. Tell Martha I'll drop by tonight."

He turned abruptly and strode out.

AGAIN he looked sharply along the almost deserted street. The sun was less than an hour high. Jeff Barnes would come. Shadrack had been certain of that from the first. Jeff was not the running kind. Shadrack thought of the big young rancher with a quick, wicked hatred. In this very street, a week ago, and before the whole town, Jeff Barnes had taken Shadrack's fancy gun away from him and beaten him down into the dust.

Shadrack returned to the Desert Lady. He ordered a drink and sipped it thoughtfully, thinking about what Limpy Horne had said. In his youth, Limpy had faced dozens of killers. He would know what he was talking about. Shadrack hadn't thought to look into the eyes of the three men he had killed, until they were dying. Then he had seen only the terror in them.

Coldly, he had decided to kill Jeff Barnes. He had been confident of his ability to do it in a fair fight, or he would have done it another way. But now there was a vague uneasiness inside him. He kept thinking about what old Limpy Horne had told him. Limpy had meant well, but somehow it hadn't increased Al's confidence.

Shadrack was there at the bar, a half-finished drink in his hand, that vague puzzlement still in his eyes, when he saw Jeff Barnes ride into the lower end of the street.

Jeff turned in and dismounted at a rack in front of Limpy Horne's store. But he didn't go inside. He stood there a moment, a tall, dark-haired young gent with hawklike features, eyes shaded against the slanting sun rays as he looked along the street. Then, slowly, he walked to the middle of the street.

Al Shadrack saw all this through a window of the Desert Lady. Others in the saloon saw it, too. Probably a dozen men were in the place. They had known a show-down between Shadrack and Jeff Barnes was brewing. Now they watched Shadrack, silently, without warmth.

Shadrack turned, went slowly toward the door, aware of a queer, heavy reluctance inside him. Shadrack was yellow. He knew it, knew that only the knowledge of the safety his superor gun-speed afforded him had made him go out to face those other men. That knowledge had made him challenge Jeff Barnes, but somehow, now, it gave him meager comfort.

He walked out onto the boardwalk. Jeff had seen him. He was standing still down there, waiting. Shadrack knew the whole town was watching, as it had watched that day when Jeff Barnes had beaten him. The remembrance stirred quick hatred, and a fierce desire for vengeance. He swaggered to the middle of the street.

They started moving slowly toward each other, their boots stirring up tiny whorls of dust. The town was deadly quiet. Al Shadrack never took his gaze off the man who walked with slow, measured tread to meet him, and he watched Jeff Barnes' eyes.

At first, he couldn't tell what lay in those eyes. A hundred feet separated them—seventy—fifty. Now he could see Jeff's cold brown eyes, shadowed under the brim of his hat. The eyes were boring at him, straight, unwavering. And Shadrack felt an icy tingle race along his spine.

There was no fear in Jeff Barnes' eyes—only hatred, and a set, relentless determination. There didn't seem to be any pupils to them, just pin-points of tawny flame. They seemed to strike ruthlessly through the thin veneer that covered Shadrack's craven soul.

Now forty feet separated them. Shadrack felt tiny rivulets of sweat running over his face, but he felt cold inside. He knew he was not swaggering now. He was staring straight into Jeff Barnes' narrowed eyes, and what he saw there gave him a feeling as if a horde of ants were crawling inside his stomach.

Thirty feet . . . What was it Limpy Horne had said? "If a man ain't scared, if he hates yuh bad enough, if he really *wants* to kill yuh, lots of times he can do it after he's mortal shot."

Jeff Barnes was not scared. He hated Shadrack, and the desire, the determination to kill was set and implacable there in his eyes. It was a thing as unchangeable as death itself.

Desperately, Shadrack jerked his gaze away from those eyes, and the movement seemed to break the hypnotic spell that had held him. He stopped—then he turned and went stumbling along the street, driven by the ugly, mostrous fear inside him.

He entered the Desert Lady, called for a drink and gulped it down. He didn't look at those in the room. He knew they were watching him, amazement and contempt in their eyes.

He went out, feeling the town's hostility pressing like hot walls about him, and along the street to the livery. He saw Jeff Barnes disappear into Limpy Horne's store.

Shadrack saddled his horse, mounted and rode fast out of Signal. He rode furiously until the town was well behind him. By then some of the unreasoning fear had left him, and he was wickedly angry.

Now he knew that old Limpy had deliberately planted in his mind the idea of watching Jeff Barnes' eyes. Limpy had known what would be in the rancher's eyes, and had guessed what the result would be.

In a shallow canyon, several miles from Signal, Shadrack stopped and kindled a camp-fire. It was long after nightfall, and a

chill wind blew across the timbered slopes. A full moon was in the sky. Shadrack hunkered there beside the fire, filled with self-pity, his bitter hatred for Jeff Barnes like a lashing blacksnake inside him.

It was past midnight when he made his decision. He remounted and rode through the low, shadowy hills to the south, and after an hour's ride approached Jeff Barnes' log ranchhouse.

Jeff lived there alone. The ranchhouse was quiet and dark.

Shadrack left his horse in a timber grove and crept up on the place afoot. He paused several minutes behind a tool-shed, making sure. The sorrel Jeff had ridden to town that day was in the near-by pole corral, so the rancher was at home. The door was shut, probably latched. But a window was open for fresh air.

Shadrack wriggled forward like a stalking cat, until he was beneath the window. He huddled there, listening carefully. Dimly he could hear the deep, slow breathing of a man inside. Shadrack grinned at the man's stupidity.

Slowly, gun in hand, he stood upright and looked into the room.

A shaft of moonlight slanted through the window. Quite plainly, against the far wall, Shadrack could see a bed, and on the bed, the contours of a blanket-covered figure.

He raised his gun, aiming deliberately, feeling savage satisfaction. Flame and smoke and thundering sound filled the room as he slammed six swift bullets into the bed.

Then, panic engulfing him, he turned and ran. He leaped on his horse and raced wildly away from the place. He would probably be blamed for Jeff Barnes' death, so he would have to ride far and fast. But being a hunted man was a small price to pay for the killing of a man who had twice humiliated him.

First, Shadrack decided, he would head for the town of Monument on the far side of the hills, and there buy supplies. He should reach Monument in the early morning, which would be perfectly safe, for it wasn't likely that the killing would have been discovered by then. . . .

Late the next afternoon, young Jeff Barnes rode into Signal. Strapped to a horse he was leading was something bulky and blanket-wrapped. Jeff dismounted at the tie-bar before Limpy Horne's store, unstrapped the bulky object and carried it inside. Limpy peered over his spectacles and Jeff placed the thing on a counter.

"Brought back what I borrowed," Jeff said. "Almost good as new."

He unwrapped the blanket, disclosing an ordinary wooden clothes dummy. Limpy gouged with a gnarled finger at the six ragged holes in the dummy.

"Now, what could of caused that?" he muttered.

"That," Jeff said unsmiling, "was caused because the critter insisted on sleepin' in my bed last night, forcin' me to bed down on a pallet over behind the stove!"

"Kicked yuh out of yore own bed, huh?" Limpy chuckled. "That's nearly as good a joke as the one Sheriff Jim Wyatt told me a little while ago."

"What joke was that?"

"Why, Jim got a call from Sheriff Nick Rawn over at Monument about noon. Accordin' to Sheriff Rawn, Al Shadrack showed up there early this mornin' and started buyin' up supplies. Wasn't anything wrong in that. But seems like Shadrack dropped a package in the street, the sheriff saw it, and started after Shadrack to give it back. Just bein' nice, yuh see. Shadrack was just startin' to get on his hoss when the sheriff come up to him.

"Sheriff Rawn swears he can't savvy what happened next. Says he called out, 'Just a minute there, Shadrack!' aimin' to give him the package. But Shadrack whirled, yelled out somethin' about not bein' took alive, and grabbed for his gun. So they had it out there in the street. The sheriff was wounded, but he killed Al Shadrack."

"A queer thing," Jeff said, still unsmilingly.

"Men make mistakes," Limpy murmured. "Some of 'em are fatal. Well, younker, yuh better go get washed up. Martha's expectin' yuh for supper tonight."

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Coming Next Issue

UNHEALTHY RANGE

A Smashing Novelet of the Western Freighters

By TOM CURRY

PLUS MANY OTHER ACTION NOVELETS AND STORIES!

Collbran's hand clutched the gun, and unconsciously his thumb pressed the trigger

VARMINTS ON THE C CROSS

By HENRY HALDEMAN

When nature's fighting mites take a hand to help a pard, a Tennessee mountain feud reaches a gun-blazing climax!

FOLLOWING the cow trails in a short-cut through rugged foot-hills, Nate Collbran rode upon a ready-made tragedy.

He heard the thin, begging nicker a horse makes when in distress, then just below, he saw a black circle, cleanly carved in the virgin grassland. The horse stood in the circle nickering plaintively as Collbran came on. It wore a saddle and a trailing picket rope, and the rope end had caught in a low buckberry bush.

The horse, crazed with thirst and hunger, had even pawed up the grass roots as far as it could reach, making a round area of bare, trampled earth. Collbran cursed softly as he got down and unwound the rope end from the brush.

"Some bonehead is afoot this mornin'," he muttered. "Serves him right for a fool trick, but it's tough on a hoss."

He held the freed rope while the horse reached out ravenously for more grass. The rope, imbedded deeply with dirt, had been dragged for hours, and probably for miles before it had caught. The trailing end still held the short loop which had slipped off of some stump or rock splinter where the horse had originally been tied.

It was a bay horse with a brand strange to Collbran. Irked by the saddle, the animal had rolled, and now the cinch was over its back while the dirt-fouled horn pointed at the ground. Collbran snorted his disgust as he undid the cinch and let the saddle fall.

"Lucky for you, hoss," he said, "that yuh didn't get a foot into a stirrup and try to climb onto yoreself."

He scanned the landscape, but the grassy breaks with their rock outcrops and here and there a tree, told him nothing. He led the famished horse to a near-by creek and let it drink by slow degrees, lest it kill itself outright. Then he removed the picket rope and turned the animal loose.

There was nothing else to do. In doing it, Collbran felt a warm and dogged satisfaction. Sure, that sudden notion of his to drop work this fine morning and go for a call upon his girl had been more than a fool's notion after all.

He was glad he hadn't happened along, say a year from now, and run into a horse skeleton attached to a rope. He liked horses. He liked cattle, too, and held a grim pride in the ranch he was building up.

HE TOOK the rope, cast it over the limb of a box elder tree, attached it to the saddle-horn, drew the old stock saddle up into plain view and left it swinging in the breeze.

Then he rode on to see Jennie. But Collbran hadn't gone more than a mile when he began to think less about Jennie and more about that bay horse. He had banked on staying at Jennie's for dinner. He had laid a bet with himself that Jennie would have hot biscuits, and his stomach had specially arranged itself for a hunk of pot roast, hot and sizzling from the old round bottom kettle.

Most of all, Collbran craved to tell Jennie about the number of logs he had down for another room on his house—their house, to be.

But all these bright considerations were clouding over.

He pulled up and stopped to think. No, it wasn't the bay horse that bothered him so much, nor that unfamiliar brand. It was a mere detail—the loop in the trailing end of that picket rope had been tied with a peculiar knot. Collbran had looked at the knot, but nothing about it had impressed him at the time except the way it was clogged with dirt. Now, however, a mental image of the knot had come back to him, with a taunting host of associations.

Could that be the same sort of knot he had learned as a mere kid, back in Tennessee? One like that was in common use there. Collbran had never seen it anywhere else.

If he went on to Jennie's, he couldn't avoid telling Jennie's father about the bay horse, thus raising the question of who had ridden it. He didn't fancy that idea. He expected to marry Jennie in the fall, and that would be a kind of knot that mightn't tie in so well with this other one.

Collbran abruptly swung his horse and started back. Of course, it was just another fool notion, yet he meant to have a better look at that knot.

But he didn't head direct for the box elder tree. He took round-about trails and kept his eyes peeled. He took the gun from its holster at his right hip, looked it over and tried its hammer.

When he reached the box elder tree, the old stock saddle hung just as he had left it, swinging in the breeze. He got down and studied the knot in the rope end. No, he had not had a fool notion. It was the same knot he had used in tying the family cow, back at Dodson Forks, deep in the mountains of Tennessee. It could be called the "weaver's hitch," with a loop left for handy undoing. Collbran was certain he had never seen this kind of a knot since he had left Dodson Forks.

And he had knocked about some in those ten years. He had something to show for it, too, besides being almighty glad he had ended up where he was. Things were different here in the West. Men were different. If they weren't different to start with, they dang soon got different. He, Nate Collbran, was different a heap from what he would have been at Dodson Forks.

His old man had been right. There weren't any backshooters out here, no family feuds dating back a hundred years or so and without any sense to them.

Collbran's father had always lived in the full expectation of dying by a Shaftow bullet. Most Collbrans had died that way. He had been a much surprised man when he had been mortally hurt by a falling "bee tree." He had lived only long enough for a good talk with Nate.

"Son," he had said, "the Shaftows have banked heavy on getting me. They'll be a disapp'inted lot, mad enough to swear vengeance on every bee tree in the timber. But I'm tellin' yuh, son, this is luck for you. You won't have to avenge yore daddy, as I did mine. You've never kilt a Shaftow, and yore way is clear."

For three generations, the Collbrans had talked of moving West. Now old Abe Collbran asked his son for a flat promise to go to the Big Country, to start over, to build a clean record—and Nate gave it.

Collbran blessed that promise. Here he was, free—free to build a house of logs, a fine big house, eighteen by thirty-two, free to start a ranch and be mighty proud of it. Here, if a man found a hungry horse tied by

the neck, why, it was an unwritten law of the land to turn the critter free.

COLLBRAN was glad he hadn't gone on to Jennie's. But what now? Well, he would go on home, throw some grub together and eat, then he would ride down canyon and talk with a neighbor who knew a lot about brands. He couldn't imagine a man leaving a saddle on a horse and letting it get loose that way; much less could he think of any business a man would have in those foothills where no roads existed and nobody lived. But, somehow, he aimed to get this thing off his chest.

He was almost home when, in crossing Fan Creek, Collbran saw boot tracks on a sand bar. He got down and studied them. He had ridden on but a little way when he caught the distinct odor of burning pine wood. It came from the direction of his buildings.

He urged his horse on fiercely until a rise of ground gave him a view of the new log house. Then he eased down when all he saw was a plume of fresh blue smoke curling up from the chimney.

The door of his house was open and Collbran had ridden fairly up to it when a man suddenly appeared from within. The man had his hat off and stood stiffly surprised in the doorway. Collbran's horse snorted.

Neither man spoke. They held immovable, looking each other over. Collbran was a big man, tall, big-boned and thick enough at the hips to fill the sixteen-inch saddle under him. The fellow in the door was as tall as he, but lean. He was of Collbran's own age, though his black hair was thin above a full, pale forehead, and he wore a small mustache. A quick, strong, active man.

His boots were the same heeled and spurred variety that had made the tracks in the sand on Fan Creek!

"Howdy, stranger." Collbran grinned. "Looks like I've got comp'ny for dinner. I'll fetch in a ham, after I've put up my hoss. You'll find spuds. . . Oh, yuh've already found 'em!"

The man also grinned, faintly.

As Collbran turned his horse in, he paused, as he often did, for a prideful look at the clear little creek that went burbling beside his corral. Then he went to the smokehouse he had fashioned between the flat sides of two big rocks and got a ham.

His manner was full of welcome as he slapped the ham on a table inside the house.

"Good," said his guest, who held a ready butcher knife in his hand. After that first moment of seeming funk, the man had turned cool, collected.

Collbran took a tin bucket and brought it back dripping with cold spring water. His guest had cut the potatoes into small pieces and these were done by the time the ham was fried and the coffee made. The two men took opposite seats at the pine dining table in this huge kitchen-living room, Collbran not troubling to toss aside his hat, but letting it swing between his shoulder-blades by the chin-strap. His guest was not disposed to talk, so Collbran made talk.

"We got a couple of good rains a week ago," Collbran said. "I never did see the grass so good this time of the year."

The man looked mystified. "This ham is good," he chuckled. "Devil with the grass!"

"I run onto a bay hoss this mornin', draggin' his rope," Collbran said. "On t'other side of Short Crick."

"Huh? Yuh found that cussed critter?"

"Yeah. Bay hoss. Strange brand to me."

The guest's eyes held to his plate. "Yes, I bought the fool brute at a ranch seventy miles south. Give seventy-five dollars for him and the saddle. Was that a fair deal?"

Collbran was somehow glad to know that the horse had been properly bought.

"Why, yes, a right fair deal, I should say," he said. "A right fair deal."

His guest guarded his talk, yet he had a certain frankness. He had shed his coat, was in vest and shirt sleeves, and the white-handled gun in a leather holster which hung from his right shoulder showed plainly. Yes, Collbran reflected, he would be left-handed. And Collbran knew that white-handled gun had never known anything but speedy draws.

His own gun was at his right hip, below the table.

"It was day 'fore yesterday," said his guest, "that I missed the bay critter first. Well, I'd took the wrong road to begin with, I reckon. I'd made camp, then I clumb a high point tryin' to set myself straight. It was dark when I got down. I couldn't find my camp till daylight, then my hoss had cleared out."

THE man broke off to strike swiftly at a large wasp which buzzed close to his head. He glowered peevishly at other wasps flying freely about the room.

Collbran pushed his chair back a little, filled and lighted his pipe. He offered the tobacco to his guest, but the man shook his head. He brought out some black plugcut and built himself a cigarette. He also took a silver dollar from a thin, sweaty pouch and placed it before Collbran with an air of condescension.

"I'll soon be movin' on, I reckon. Is that fair money for a meal in yore country?"

Collbran's eyebrows lifted. He gravely took the coin and laid it down before his guest.

"The nearest hotel, stranger, is at Curlee, northeast of here."

The man picked up the money and planked it down again where he first had put it. "Mister, I'm payin' for what I get off'n you."

"Yuh're at C Cross Ranch," Collbran insisted softly. "I was hopin' yuh'd notice that." And he pushed the money back.

"I did notice that." The man put a match flame to his cigarette with studied deliberation.

They smoked. Now and then their eyes met and held with a steady calm. Breeze and sunlight poured in and the big room was airy and cheerful. A pair of phoebes flew in and out at the open doors and windows. They had a nest saddled on a stringer across the open gable. It was nearly above the dining table, and whenever the birds' screaming whistle marked their quick passage, the guest glanced up with a frown.

One of the big wasps which had the run of the place, hovered a second, then alighted on the table. It prowled a moment, then crawled onto the silver dollar which still lay where Collbran had pushed it. The men watched the wasp as it remained there, intent upon the coin, its black and yellow abdomen working fitfully. Would it be wanting to pay its rent, Collbran wondered. It had lived with him all summer.

"Big as a killdeer, ain't he?" Collbran grinned. "I been figgerin' all summer to put screens to my doors and windows but, shucks, a man can't do everything to once. Got to another year, though. I'm gettin' married in the fall."

The guest sniffed. He was eyeing the wasp with plain distaste. What business had a danged insect smelling his money? With expert aim, he flicked his hot cigarette ash upon the wasp, laughing as it writhed and tumbled.

Finally it fought free and took wing. Looping Collbran's head, it whipped back, struck the guest in the neck and fell into the loose collar of his shirt. The man struck savagely, but the wasp turned and sunk its sting deep into the white, blue-veined flesh.

He clawed the insect out in a fury of pain and curses and tramped it on the floor.

As he looked up, Collbran was chuckling.

"And you laugh, cuss yuh!" the man flared.

"Excuse me," Collbran hastened. "I never thought—why, them little mud daubers have been here all summer and that's the first time one of 'em ever showed fight. I've sort of come to like 'em. They roost on my hands when I eat, lick up syrup from my plate, along with me."

"So, yuh'd make it my fault!" the man raged afresh. "That's because yuh live with the varmints! Birds, insects! That's fittin' for a Collbran varmint that—"

He stopped, as if he had spilled poison with the name. He blanched at his own reckless temper, touched off by a little wasp.

Collbran sat still, but stiffened in every fiber.

"What's the odds?" the man burst out. "Yuh call me 'stranger'—as if yuh didn't know me!"

" 'Course I know yuh. Yuh're Kip Shaftow. But listen, Kip. Yuh're at the C Cross Ranch. When I left Dodson Forks, I cleaned the slate—you knew that. And when I saw yuh in my house, I reckoned yuh had the same right. Yuh didn't say 'Collbran' to me. No more would I say 'Shaftow' to you."

Kip Shaftow laughed. He took up the silver dollar and again slapped it down before Collbran.

"When yuh left Dodson Forks, yuh left like any mis'able, back-shootin' Collbran would—with yore tail between yore legs. When I seen this shanty this mornin', you was the last person I expected to find livin' in it."

COLLBRAN stood up slowly. Dodson Forks had caught up with him. Here was fight talk, yes, but Collbran's heavy move showed only regret.

"Kip," he said, "yuh mighty well know that when my old man got kilt, he asked a promise of me. And I gave it."

Kip Shaftow stood up. He made a broad shoulder shrug, one that would shake down the holster under his coat.

"When my old man cashed in—a year ago,

now," he said, "he was still grouchy because he'd missed gettin' Abe Collbran. His dyin' wish was that I hunt down Abe's whelp. I give him a promise. Now is that bogged-down gun of yore'n—"

Collbran seemed to explode, lunging bull-like. Kip Shaftow got his gun clear, but Collbran caught his wrist. It was an off-side stance, awkward to both men, and they went into whirlpool action. Shaftow fired three times without catching up.

Then Collbran's right hand closed on the gun, his left clutched a shoulder of Shaftow's vest. Like pulling a back tooth, he twisted the weapon free. It roared as unconsciously his thumb pressed the trigger, then he flung it from him. His oaklike fist caught his teetering guest in the face and stretched him out flat.

The play had taken Shaftow off guard. He had been set for gun work. He raised himself on an elbow and shook his head groggily. As his eyes cleared, they fastened on the floored gun, lying near.

The remainder of the building, aside from the big square room, was sealed off for a bedroom, with rough pine sheeting. Collbran scooped Shaftow's gun from the floor in a quick backward throw. Shaftow watched it vanish in the dark storage loft under the gables above the bedroom.

He got up, his glance dropping to Collbran's waist.

Collbran unbuckled his own belt and tossed belt and gun into the dark loft. Shaftow grinned.

"When you was about nineteen, Nate Collbran," he said, "there was some at Dodson Forks as called yuh a wrestler. But there was nobody there who could stand up to Kip Shaftow in a sluggin' match. Yuh asked for it, cuss yuh: I'm goin' to kill yuh barehanded, by inches."

For the first time, Collbran faced a Shaftow in anger. It seemed unreasonable, a half-baked thing. They jockeyed and dodged, they thrust and parried. They gained their second wind. Shaftow deliberately worked up steam, landing practise blows at will on Collbran's face and body. His fighting grin became set, his killing intent stamped on his face.

Try as he would for another pile-driver, Collbran was only playing himself out. Shaftow was always just out of reach, yet his body seemed to squirt hydraulic jolts. By sheer exertion, Collbran at last fought to a clinch and his right fist pounded Shaftow until both men swayed with exhaustion. Then Shaftow broke free and they stood back, glaring and heaving.

But Shaftow was first to push the fight. Under a blast of force and cunning, Collbran's guard went down. A blow like a cannon shot struck his jaw. He crashed back against the board partition, crashed through the whole half of it and fell among lumber wreckage.

Shaftow stood back with a croaking laugh. Collbran got to his feet as if he were climbing out of a fog.

"So," Shaftow taunted, "yuh still think yuh're goin' to get married?"

Collbran came out and took more punishment. Upon the verge of collapse, he fought to another clinch and took Shaftow down with him. They clutched, breathing hard in a struggle that could not last. But it did last for half an hour. At the end of that time, Collbran had Shaftow in a snug half-Nelson. Again they paused to breathe, and into Collbran's lungs came—smoke!

The table was smashed, a cupboard had fallen and food and dishes littered the floor. The struggling men were naked to the waist, their shirts torn to nothing. And now Collbran saw their sweating hides streaked, not alone with red, but with lines of sooty black. The stovepipe was down, its broken joints spouting soot. The stove lay on its side; its fire, spilled on the plank floor, was the center of a circle of leaping flames.

"Cuss yuh, Kip!" Collbran panted. "My house is burnin'!"

HE LET go his hard-won half-Nelson and rose to his knees. Shaftow started to rise, but Collbran got him with such a wallop that the floor rose and smote him again. Collbran crawled to the tin bucket on a corner shelf and pulled himself up. With the bucket held waist high, he played a stream of water over the fire in the plank floor.

"Wait!" Shaftow blurted. "Let's drink that!"

"We ain't as hot as this fire. I'm savin' this house! I'm livin' in it!"

Shaftow rolled to his feet, ran and got a table leg and charged Collbran with that. Collbran stopped one blow with the empty bucket, then took a slash on the head and shoulder which staggered him. He kept his feet only by running crazily. He managed

to get a table leg for himself.

They fought with clubs, like broadswords, or they stood back and used the clubs as canes to support their swaying bodies. Neither gave in. They settled to their haunches, panting like dogs. Shaftow suddenly crowded Collbran through the gaping partition and dealt him a crushing head blow.

But in driving the blow, he fell thunderously on the loose partition boards. Panicked, he threw a back somersault, came up with a board nailed momentarily to his bare back, and stood out dizzily in the main room.

Collbran was done, finished. He held to his feet by hugging the log wall, but his head was like a spinning barrel. A breath would have flattened him. Shaftow began poking about, babbling inanely, looking for water. He found the upset tea kettle, hurled it weakly at Collbran and went teetering toward the outer door.

He was going outside for water! Collbran sank to the floor in relief, though his own tongue was like a puffball. He propped his chin in his hands, blinking to clear his senses. Then he saw Shaftow halt, as if changing his mind. He saw what had stopped Shaftow. Resting on its pegs above the door, was Collbran's powerful old double-barreled 10-gauge.

He had not thought of the gun, had not taken it down in weeks. Quick as thought, Shaftow slammed the door and barred it. He reached up and got the 10-gauge. Then he sank to the floor, facing Collbran, the 10-gauge laid out before him. Heavy panting still racked the man's body.

"Nate Collbran, is—is this cannon loaded?"

Collbran nodded dumbly.

But Shaftow broke the gun, glanced at the brass shell butts and snapped it shut again. A gleam of new life came to his eyes and the ugly, killer grin returned.

"Yuh thought I was goin' out for water," he croaked gloatingly. "I reckon I've got yuh now."

Always alert, yet with devilish deliberation, Shaftow reached for a gallon can of peaches which lay near and rolled it toward him with the gun muzzle. As if not to risk his jaded nerves, he up-ended the can and rested the gun across it.

Twenty-five feet away, Collbran's flesh crawled as he saw the 10-gauge trained upon him.

"Yuh can't do that, Shaftow! That's murder!"

But Shaftow's grin went undisturbed. With slow exultation, he cocked both hammers of the gun. "Listen, fool! I'm dyin' for water. I'm lettin' yuh have it now, then I'm findin' me a drink."

Collbran stared at the gun muzzle like a man paralyzed. Then something gripped his glance, holding it as in a spell. He peered along the gun barrels into Shaftow's beady eye. He saw that eye take sight, saw the man's cheek snuggle down and his body stiffen to meet the gun's heavy kick.

Shaftow's fingers squeezed both triggers.

The thunder of the 10-gauge rattled every wall. Shaftow was hidden in smoke. Collbran seemed fairly lifted to his feet. He ran and caught up the 10-gauge from the floor, where Shaftow lay moaning. He looked at the gun—what was left of it. Its right barrel was blown wide open, its whole muzzle end was bent sharply to the left. The left barrel bulged like a snake that has swallowed a pack rat, part of its metal lodged this moment in Shaftow's bleeding hand.

Collbran dropped the bursted gun, bent over Shaftow and fingered his shoulder bones. He examined the torn hand, then flung it down.

"Get up," he said. "Get up and set, yuh low-lived scum, 'fore I get mad and belt the stuffin' out of yuh!"

HE FOUND a can of tomatoes on the floor, hacked it open and dumped its contents into two tin cups. One he placed on the floor for Shaftow and with the other seated himself opposite, his back to the wall.

Shaftow arranged himself in similar fashion on his side and the two men drank greedily.

"What the blazes happened?" Shaftow complained.

"Yuh tried to murder an unarmed man—you, a Shaftow, who accuses Collbrans of back-shootin'."

"I was dyin' for water," Shaftow said lamely. Presently his eyes fell comprehendingly on the wrecked 10-gauge. "And I thought I was baggin' me a Collbran!" he marveled.

"But it looks like you was spittin' against the wind, don't it?" said Nate Collbran. "Right in my own house! Me, I'm a peaceable man. And friendly. Even with mud dauber varmints. Look. Them little pardners of mine had the muzzles of that gun plugged with mud. Some of it's there yet."

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Shaftow looked closer at the gray substance caked in the bulged gun, then settled back in weak disgust.

"Brace up," Collbran said. "Yuh got a twenty-four-mile ride ahead of yuh. Yuh got to have that hand fixed up or mebby lose it."

"Yuh mean a doctor might save this hand —my gun hand?"

Collbran snorted. "Why not? But yuh'll never do any more gunnin' around here. I'm buyin' that bay hoss of yores for seventy-five dollars, and yuh're hirin' a railroad seat back home. What yuh say, Kip Shaftow?"

Shaftow gazed at his bleeding hand. "I—I don't recollect knowin' for shore of a Collbran ever shootin' a Shaftow from behind. I could be wrong."

"Huh?" Collbran observed drily.

Shaftow puzzled on. "Sure. I've got a heap of things to think about, ridin' home on the cars. Them cussed mud daubers!"

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

maraudin' he and a band o' men took the law into their own hands. They rode to the reservation and unhesitatingly shot down a bunch of Indians that had been doin' the robbin' and killin'. After that the Indians held Captain "Cheesum" in much awe and respect.

His cattle brands were famous. They was the Jingle-Bob and the Long Rail brands. The famous Jingle-Bob wasn't a brand, but a peculiar slit in the ear which made one portion of the ear hang down and "bob" as the animal moved. The Long Rail brand was a long white streak burned in the hide from shoulder to hip.

John Chisum was one of the leaders in the Lincoln County war wherein Billy the Kid played an important part. He was friend to many, was John Chisum, but he ruled his cattle kingdom with a powerful will and firm hand.

He died at Eureka Springs, Arkansas, in 1884. Was buried at Paris, Texas, where a large monument to his memory stands.

The Drink Called Pulque

Next letter's from Wade Parks o' Watertown, Maryland. Wade says he's been readin' about a drink o' the desert country what's got his curiosity roused to the boilin' point.

"What," asks Wade, "is this here now drink called 'pulque', and how come?"

Somebody's told him you gets the drink out of a water barrel on the desert, but from the tone o' young Wade's letter I take it he's plumb skeptical like.

Pays to be some skeptical, Wade, yuh're durned right. Whoever give you yore info about where pulque comes from was spoofin' you, shore. The desert "water barrel" is one kind o' cactus plant what contains wet pulp inside, but you don't never find "pulque" in it, no suh.

Pulque, or the makin's for it, comes out of a cactus plant all right, but it's the Maguey, not the water barrel.

It's a drink what the Mexicans enjoy a lot, but ain't many Americanos can imbibe it. It's made from the fermented juice o' the Maguey plant, and is obtained by cuttin' off the flower stalk o' the plant and collectin' the water that collects in the hollow of the center o' the plant.

After this juice ferments it's called pulque. Tastes a whole lot like soapy water, and has the same sort o' kick as a young Missouri mule. Yessuh!

The Century Plant

The Maguey plant is shore a interestin' growth, Wade. It's what's sometimes called the century plant. Supposed to bloom once

(Turn to page 74)

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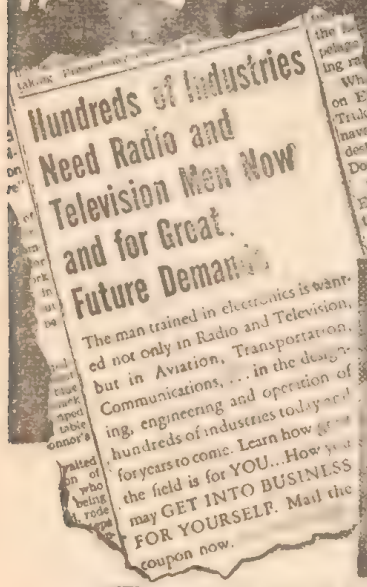

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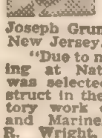

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in a century, but it actually blooms a whole lot sooner'n that. It'll stand for years, its thick, waxen, green blades with their sharp, weapon-like ends makin' a handsome, rounded shrub.

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Cripple Creek Gold Strike

Now then here's a shore interestin' letter from a so'jer boy. He's back home oncet again and tryin' his hand at a little placer minin' out Nevada way. Name's Charlie Frazer. Charlie says he's pannin' out around four dollars a day, but it's work; not play. Wants to know how the famous Cripple Creek gold strike was made.

Cripple Creek gold was discovered by a old cowpuncher, Charlie. Lived right there in the neighborhood o' Poverty Gulch, Colorado.

Cripple Creek was a cow district where the grass growed long and lush because a creek run down the middle o' the gulch. It broadened out into a slough, and so many cattle had sunk up to their horns in this slough the cow-hands had finally named the durned place Cripple Creek.

Bob Womack, son of a poverty hounded rancher with a small spread, was the one what found the first rich ore on the creek.

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Bob was alluz on the look-out for likely mineral specimens, hopin' to strike it rich.

One day while stumblin' through the gulch he picked up a piece of ore what looked promisin', and he took it to a assayer in Colorado Springs. The sample tested so rich the assayer told two fortune-hunters about it. They followed Bob back to the gulch and filed on adjoinin' claims to the one he staked out.

A Lucky Claim

One o' the early arrivals was Winfield Stratton whose wife was said to've left him because he was always prospectin'. He staked a claim on Bull Hill, and within a few years was a millionaire.

But Bob Womack sold his claim for five thousand dollars only to see it later produce five million dollars as the Gold King Mine. He went away upon receivin' his five thousand, and later come back to the gulch with empty pockets. Wealthy friends contributed to his support durin' his declinin' years.

So long for now, folks. Come next month at the old HITCHIN' RAIL. I'll shore be lookin' for you!

Buck Benson

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

ONE of our historical poets got to thinking one day about the wonderful names we Americans give to far out-of-the-way places and mountains and rivers and such, and he finally set himself down to his desk and wrote a mighty fine piece of literature.

Being a mild-tempered hombre, Mr. Stephen Vincent Benet spoke about only the beautiful names. He didn't mention such places as "Bleached Bones Crossing," "Deadwood Gulch," "Tombstone," "Bullfrog," "Bullet Hole," and a score of other towns, cattle trails, canyons and creeks with mighty odd handles.

Here is what one of our THRILLING WESTERN authors has to say about a certain strip of our great country:

The Pecos is a long river, a strange and sinister river. A thousand miles of twisting canyon from the pine-clad mountains of New Mexico to the gray, bleak bluffs of the Rio Grande on the Texas border.

Here is range country. Here will always be range country. The mountainous brakes, the alkali flats, the vast stretches of shifting sands, the treeless plains rolling to hills dim and distant on the skyline.

These have never known and will never know the plow, save for narrow irrigated strips that are but nigh invisible hairlines etching the stark immensities of the wastelands.

Trails cross the Pecos. Trails lurid in legend, grim in history. Where men bulk big and their exploits are stranger than any page dared by fiction. The Butterfield Trail, the Chihuahua, the San Antonio-El Paso. These are famous routes, by which the treasure of Mexico and the farther West came East. There is, too, the waterless Goodnight-Loving Trail. And there are others.

Less known and less talked about, but surpassed by none in its story of blood and violence, is the Pecos

[*Turn page*]

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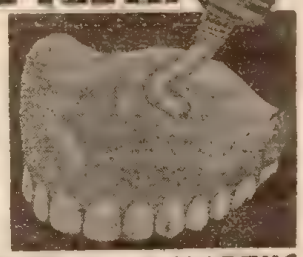

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Trail. Less spoken of, too, is its crossing; but neither the Horsehead, Fort Lancaster, nor the Pontoon has a history of grim tragedy and despair to surpass that of Bleached Bones Crossing, where the bluffs are the color of caked blood, and shadows stain the waters of the Pecos a gloomy purple.

Bleached Bones got its name from the many skeletons that were, and still are, found half-buried in the sands and the rusty clay.

And it was toward grim Bleached Bones Crossing that the Lazy K trail herd rolled under its cloud of sun-splashed dust.

The last sentence of that fine bit of Western literature of course tells you that we are quoting the opening of a splendid novel written by Bradford Scott for our next issue of THRILLING WESTERN Magazine.

Author Scott knows his historical backgrounds just as well as the next hombre, and he knows how to fit a character into the word-picture of such a famous ford as Bleached Bones Crossing.

The reckless adventures of our favorite character, Walt Slade, the under-cover Texas Ranger who is known as *El Halcon*, the Hawk, might be pure fiction in the story entitled THE PECOS TRAIL, but the same kind of adventures were pure fact in the history of Bleached Bones Crossing.

All a real good author like Bradford Scott need do to corral a smashing yarn like THE PECOS TRAIL is to stand on the high bluff of the real Pecos River and look down at the treacherous ford where so many punchers have died with their bellowing stock.

That's what Mr. Scott did. He could see his characters come alive, hear the whine of rustler bullets, taste the swirl of alkali dust from the trail behind him, and feel the pressure of men's minds and wills against one another.

From Bleached Bones Crossing, the author takes his story back along the cattle trail to the struggle for survival and freedom upon the cattle ranges. He plunges his chief character, Walt Slade, into a battle of brawn and wits against the kind of ruthless renegades who rode high-wide-and-handsome through the West.

THE PECOS TRAIL is a novel for top hands. Author Scott pulls no punches, and he doesn't pull a six-gun unless it starts smoking.

If you readers want a yarn about the real West, without a lot of fancy trimmings and indigestible palaver in it, then get to the news-stands early and order the next issue of

Answers to Questions on Page 53

1. No. The vast herds of wild horses were bred from the horses that escaped or were left by the Conquistadores. **2.** Tombstone, Arizona—where many noted gunmen were buried "with their boots on." **3.** Sam Houston. **4.** Death Valley, California, which is 276 feet below sea level. **5.** The name Hopi is a contraction of Hopitu, meaning "peaceful ones." The Hopis are a branch of the Shoshonean Indians.

THRILLING WESTERN. Bradford Scott's story, THE PECOS TRAIL, is the featured novel.

In the same magazine, you will find two smashing novelets, one entitled THE LAST STAGE OUT, by Author Stephen Payne, and the other entitled UNHEALTHY RANGE, by Tom Curry. Both of these writers know their way from Powder River, Montana, to Death Valley, California, and back again, whether by hob-nailed boots or saddle pony.

Mr. Payne's story in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN travels by stage-coach and runs into a blizzard high up in the Rockies, where the stage driver puts his two passengers up for the night in an abandoned mining camp. There are three pretty serious complications. First, the stage is carrying a valuable gold shipment. Second, one of the passengers is a powerfully attractive young lady. Third, the old mining camp is populated by a passel of gun-hung gents who figure on acquiring themselves an easy fortune.

From the moment the stage driver unhitches his six-horse team until the blizzard blows itself out, THE LAST STAGE OUT is a nip-and-tuck battle of wits and six-guns.

In Mr. Curry's novelet, UNHEALTHY RANGE, the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN tackles the freighting business of the West. We get a colorful picture of a

[*Turn page*]

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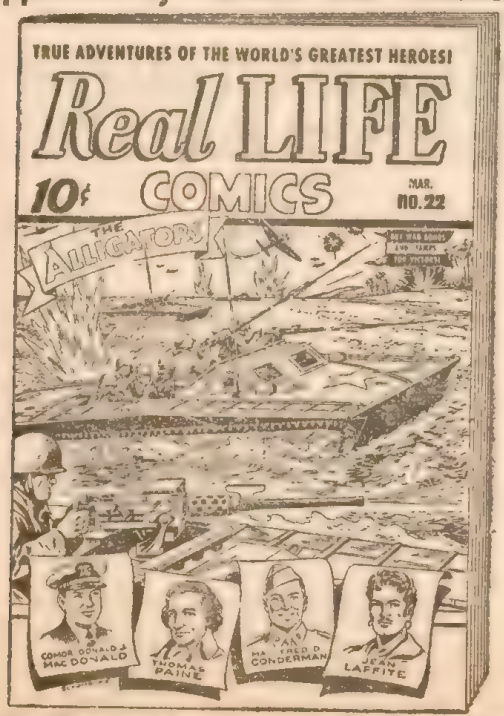

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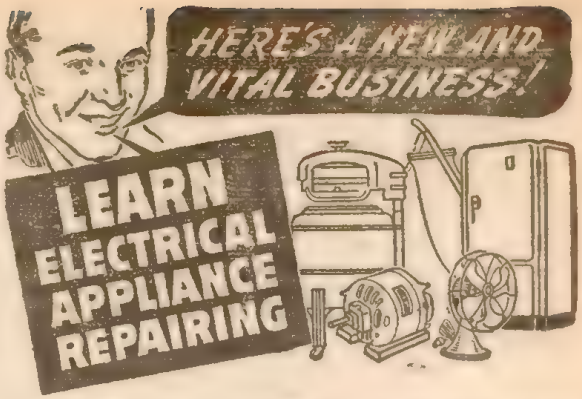

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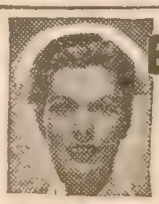

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young puncher turning his talent toward wagons and teams in order to earn a stake and win a bride. It's an action picture. From the word *go*, our puncher pard runs into gun trouble, because some strangers from El Paso see a way to steal his freighting jobs out from under him.

Losing his business is not as hard a blow as losing his future bride to a smooth-talking gunman, so our puncher pard starts moving through UNHEALTHY RANGE with a big burst of speed.

Look forward to the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN, pards. We have ordered up three big dishes for your range fare—a hard-shooting trail yarn, a stage story, and a freighting tale. They are stories about the West, by authors who know the West, and they are written for readers who want their fiction-show hot, fast, and spiced with gunpowder. And in addition to the three feature stories, there will be several short stories and the HITCHING RAIL by way of dessert.

LETTERS FROM READERS

WE IN the editorial offices of THRILLING WESTERN are plenty eager to know how you like the stories which appear in this magazine. Your letters are mighty interesting.

Let us cite a few letters to show the tenderfoot newcomers to THE HITCHING RAIL exactly what the mailman brings to our corral:

In a past issue of THRILLING WESTERN, I met an old-time friend, W. C. Tuttle. His THUNDER RIVER VALLEY is, to my mind, one of the outstanding stories of its kind.

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Some readers grade every story in an issue according to some system of their own, but I am not conceited enough for that. I only pick out the outstanding story in each magazine.—*R. W. Bond, Calexico, California.*

Author W. C. Tuttle is a favorite with a great many readers, and we are impatiently waiting to read his next yarn ourselves, when the mailman brings it in. Mr. Tuttle is a California resident, himself, and is always writing us about the last duck-hunting or camping trip he went on up in the Sierras.

I have been reading THRILLING WESTERN for a long time and think it is a swell magazine. I like THE HITCHING RAIL, El Halcon, and Swap and Whopper. Thanks a lot for the membership card for my friend to join THE RANGE RIDERS' CLUB—*S. J. B., Belle Center, Ohio.*

We are glad that S. J. B. brought up the RANGE RIDERS CLUB, for we want to remind everybody who hasn't joined up that they can become members just by sending in the application coupon which is printed at the end of this department.

It doesn't cost anything to join. There are no fees or dues. Just fill out the application blank, and send it to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. By doing that, you'll become an authentic member of our own outfit. We'll send you your membership card *pronto.*

I am a fellow that has been born and raised on a cattle ranch in the eastern part of the State of Washington. I have ridden on many a round-up and trail herd. Now I am serving in the United States Coast Guard. It is a much different job from that of riding horses, but I like it fine.

I have read your THRILLING WESTERN Magazine for quite a while, and every time our boat now pulls into dock from patrol, I get one of your magazines to take back to read. The stories make me feel a bit homesick, but I get a thrill out of them.

[*Turn page*]

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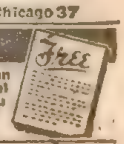

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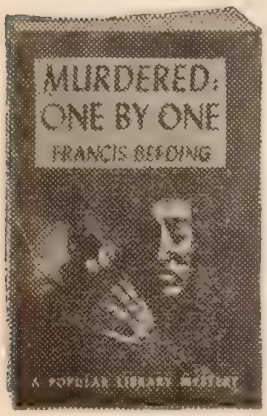

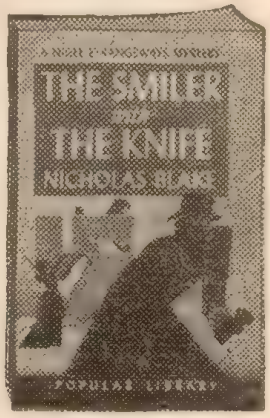

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I would like very much to become a member of THE RANGE RIDERS' CLUB—*D. B. Albright, U. S. C. G.*

We get a great many letters from Service men and women who are in far distant places, and it is interesting to learn that THRILLING WESTERN is helping to keep the home fire burning in their hearts. Perhaps the finest thing that can be said about the magazine is that it is thoroughly American.

Although I live in a big city and have never been west of the Mississippi River, I am quite a fan of THRILLING WESTERN.

When I started out reading about El Halcon, Swap and Whopper, and your other characters, I must confess that some of their lingo was strange to me. But I soon caught on to all the Western terms. Right now I feel that I could hand out just as good dialect as a dyed-in-the-hide puncher could give.

Some day I hope to live in the West on a cattle ranch, so I'm keeping up my reading, because I don't want to be taken for a tenderfoot—*Kate Jenkins, Mobile, Ala.*

The next letter registers a protest:

Most of your stories are about the Southwest, but I would like to remind you that there are vast cattle ranges in Wyoming and Montana, and stock is raised in such States as Utah and Oregon. In those States you don't get terrible droughts and have so much sandy desert.

Why not bring Walt Slade, the Hawk, up on an adventure in Northern Montana, where the grass grows knee-deep and there are miles and miles of beautiful rolling prairie? I'd like to see El Halcon up against a hard outfit of outlaws along the Canadian Border for a change.—*George Bancroft, Havre, Mont.*

Well, Mr. Bancroft, we'll just have to refer your letter to our authors, and see if we can't get one of them to cook up a good Montana yarn for you. We must point out that El Halcon is really a Texas Ranger, and it might not be advisable to take him away from the State where he is most needed. But watch our next issues and see if we don't round up a good Northern yarn for your taste.

See you all next issue, partners.

—THE EDITOR.

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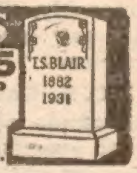

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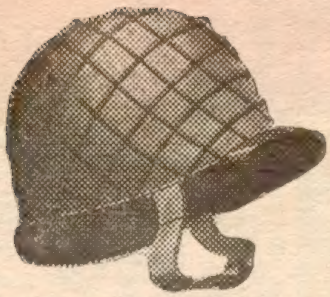

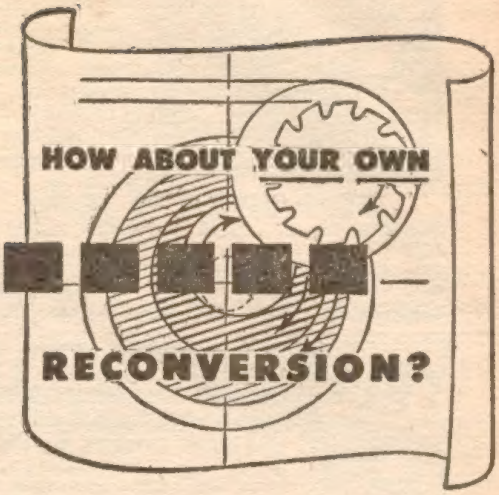

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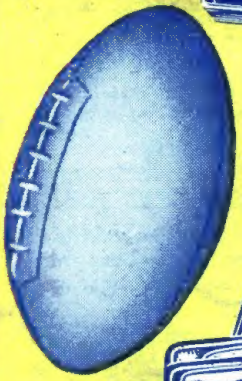

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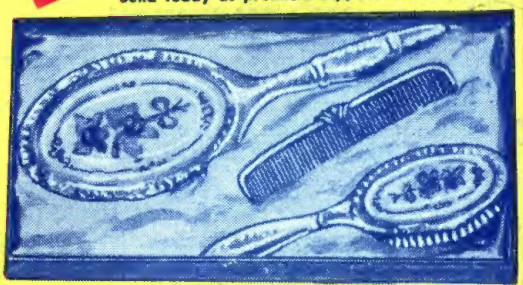

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